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The Cow Project: Analytical and Representational Dilemmas of Dairy Farmers' Conceptions of Cruelty and Kindness

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Abstract

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Abstract: This paper explores different conceptions of cruelty and kindness as they relate to the Australian dairy industry. Findings are drawn from the *Dairy Farming Wellbeing Project: 2017-18*, which we affectionately call The Cow Project (also see thecowproject.com.au).¹ Funded by Animals Australia, this study was designed to consider the many issues affecting the health and wellbeing of dairy farmers, their families, cows, calves, and to a more limited extent, bulls. The primary objective was to investigate whether farmers themselves identified (potential) links between their own wellbeing and the wellbeing of their farmed animals. A total of 29 qualitative interviews were conducted with 8 dairy industry consultants and 21 dairy farmers (past or present), in South Australia, Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria. Conversational, narrative interviewing was used purposively to draw out lived experiences of the dairy farming and the dairy industry. In the current paper, we consider notions of cruelty and kindness through our eyes and those of our participants. We found that to lesser or greater extents, participants used techniques of rationalisation to give revised versions of animal lives and wellbeing in order to facilitate their own moral and ethical comfort, with most maintaining that harmful animal practices within the industry were necessary, for economic reasons, tradition, expediency and/or for the good of the animals.

Keywords: kindness, cruelty, dairy farmers, cows, bulls, calves, vegan researchers

In this paper we explore the concepts of cruelty and kindness raised in a qualitative study we conducted throughout 2017-2018 that addressed dairy farmers' wellbeing and the wellbeing of cows, calves and bulls. We acknowledge that our interpretation of findings may be read as contentious and partisan by some. These discussions reflect the contentious nature of discussions about dairy farming, the dairy industry and dairy consumption in Australia (see 'What's Wrong with Dairy'; 'Ethics Clash at Dairy Protest'; 'Dairy Cows'; Westhoek et al.). The rise of social media in particular has enabled more consumers to understand dairy farming politics and practices (see 'What's Wrong with Dairy'; Capps; Fallon and Friedrich; 'Dairy Cows') and their effects on animals. Concerns about the lives of animals on dairy farms have led to a questioning of the assumed benefits of humans consuming dairy products. This includes problematising the normative dietary ideas in Australia that have historically circulated about the 'health' benefits, if not necessity, of humans consuming dairy products for iron, protein and so on (see 'Discover Dairy'). This injunction to consume dairy products is not only promoted by the dairy industry but publicly endorsed by state and federal government policies and practices, including those taught to school children (see 'Discover Dairy').

Yet it is not only health-oriented criticisms of the dairy industry that have emerged in the last decade. The ethical legitimacy of dairy farming has also been questioned by a rising (public and scientific) awareness of the environmental destruction that increased global intake of dairy products causes (see Westhoek et al.) and most important to this paper, the physical and emotional needs of other animals. There has been a concomitant growth in animal welfare science knowledge (see D. Fraser), and increasing awareness of the actual processes and practices that make up animal agriculture. Put plainly, more people elect to consume plant-based products (Lundahl) because they recognise that cows, calves and bulls pay a heavy price for humans such as calf separation, dehorning/debudding, tail docking, forced semen harvesting and insemination, and slaughter (see 'What's Wrong With Dairy'). Growing but not yet mainstream, these concerns have prompted a cultural shift in understanding that has necessitated a reconfiguration of human-'farmed' animal relations, a deprivileging of mechanistic discourses and a valorisation of the possibility of empathetic knowledge (Cole 89).

As we discuss below, many dairy farmers we spoke with were well aware of the threats to the ethical legitimacy of dairy farming based on concerns about animal cruelty. Pressures particularly from urban Australian consumers have meant that dairy farmers now need to find ways to defend their farming practices in ways not expected of them in previous decades. It is not so easy for dairy farmers to unproblematically assume public support for old, ‘scientific’ beliefs about farmed animals, such as, they don’t have feelings, don’t care about their offspring or don’t interact with other farmed animals in ways that are meaningful to them. For dairy farmers wanting to see themselves and present themselves to others as kind and humane people, defending their farming practices poses several challenges. Discussions about how they try to defend their practices in light of questions about cruelty and kindness are central to this paper. We consider a range of the strategies and cultural repertoires used that allow dairy farmers to hold seemingly contradictory positions of cruelty and kindness toward their farmed animals (also see Oleschuk et al; Wicks) and we situate these within broader narratives that construct and maintain the belief of human exceptionalism through a belief in ‘logics of domination’ predicated on the objectification (and variously the denial, exclusion, and silencing) of the ‘Other’ (Plumwood, ‘Mastery’). We start by briefly outlining the study from which the data is drawn.

Background to the study

Throughout 2017-2018 we conducted a research project investigating dairy farmers’ wellbeing and the links to the wellbeing of the animals they kept on their farms. Funded by Animals Australia, this project involved the work of two academics (the authors of this paper) and research assistance from Jess Loyer in 2017 (The University of Adelaide), Kate Walton (The Queensland University of Technology (QUT)) 2018-2019 and Naomi Stekelenburg (QUT) in late 2018-2019. Sandra Cookland, a Master of Social Work placement student (QUT), also gave support to the project during the second half of 2018.²

The two main cohorts interviewed for *The Cow Project* were: 1) those working in a consultative or research capacity with the industry, and 2) farmers (past and/or present). Interviews were conducted with 21 dairy farmers in Victoria, Queensland and New South

Wales, and 8 dairy/dairy animal welfare industry consultants in South Australia. Of the 21 dairy farmers, 10 are women and 11 are men. Of the 8 consultants, 3 are men and 5 are women. The second author conducted 20 of the 21 interviews with dairy farmers (past and/or present), and two of the 8 interviews with industry consultants, allowing for close and multiple readings of the data. Ethical approval was provided by Flinders University, South Australia, as it was the initial host to the project when both the authors of this paper worked there.

Conversational, narrative interviewing was used purposively to draw out lived experiences of humans working in the dairy industry. Most interviews lasted well over an hour, with one notably short interview of 20 minutes and several notably long ones of 2-3 hours. A friendly and emotionally engaged style of interviewing was used. Topics covered throughout the interviews covered on-farm practices, farmer wellbeing and animal welfare, as well as asking about potential barriers to the recruitment of farmers to studies like this.

Two methods of analysis were performed by both authors on the interview data. Firstly, using NVivo 12 Pro all professionally transcribed interviews were subjected to a thematic analysis at the semantic level (Braun and Clarke). The initial analysis focussed on developing broad themes present in the work (for example, 'animal welfare' or 'human welfare'). Following this an inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke) was undertaken by both authors whereby themes within and across the broad initial themes were identified (for example, within 'animal welfare' issues regarding calving or insemination). In conjunction with the thematic analysis we also conducted a critical narrative analysis with seven overlapping phases guiding our post-interview process: (1) Hearing the stories, experiencing each other's emotions while listening back to the interviews; (2) Re-reading transcriptions; (3) Segmenting individual transcripts into stories and codifying themes, taking note of any unexpected revelations or contradictions; (4) Scanning across different domains of experience to consider structural, cultural, interpersonal and intrapersonal aspects of narratives; (5) Linking the personal with the political; (6) Looking for commonalities and differences among participants; and (7) Writing an accurate and trustworthy representation of participants' experiences (H. Fraser, 'Doing Narrative Research').

This narrative approach assumes that stories are a crucial part of human culture that give us insights into identities, societies, and individual and collective senses of ‘how things should be’ but also how things might change in the future (H. Fraser, ‘Doing Narrative Research’; Fraser and MacDougall). Critical research of this kind is designed to ask challenging and delicate questions, both in relation to human and animal health and wellbeing. It relies on a warm, non-judgmental, interested and rapport-building approach designed to establish connections through demonstrating empathy and allowing the (very careful and contextual) posing of difficult questions (such as about animal welfare or farmers’ thoughts of suicide). Critical narrative research is an iterative and interactive process, rather than unidirectional extraction of information from others. Insights from this approach can also allow for challenges to be made to dominant modes of understanding, which can be the foundation to change (H. Fraser, ‘Doing Narrative Research’; ‘In the Name of Love’; Fraser and MacDougall).

Confronting paradigmatic differences

As we discuss in this and other papers about the project, there are obvious paradigmatic differences between advocates of the dairy industry and us the authors/researchers. In other publications, including The Cow Project website (www.thecowproject.com.au), we explore different aspects of the data, including those that take a ‘softer’ approach to ethical questions about dairy farming. We do this in order to represent not just the participants’ views but also the full and diverse range of values on the research team. In the current paper we ask harder questions about dairy farming, cruelty and kindness. In future work we will focus on the ongoing gendered dimensions of dairy farming in Australia.

In many ways this was an extremely difficult project for us to undertake. Immersing ourselves in the worlds and beliefs of dairy farmers has been confronting for us as vegan feminists, as has reading the various ‘animal welfare science’ literature that purports to look out for animals on the kinds of farms we visited. As qualitative researchers who conduct interviews that evoke personal and not just abstract material, we give serious thought to trying to find ways to honour participants’ stories and statements. We anticipated that this might lead to challenges

for us from the outset of the project, due to the distinct differences in beliefs about animal agriculture and associated practices between us the authors and our (then prospective) research participants. However, it was during the interviews themselves that we felt these dilemmas more acutely.

Entering participants' private spaces and hearing about their life on the farm creates a form of emotional closeness and sense of loyalty, which in turn creates some analytical and representational dilemmas. There is the dilemma of our being able to subject the data to critical analysis while trying not to alienate participants or be accused of misrepresenting their reported experiences. We have felt conflicting loyalties: to the humans who generously gave us their time and access to their lives, homes and farms, but also the loyalty we feel towards the animals on dairy farms. Ignoring or downplaying their needs and interests might also be constructed as a betrayal.

We could skip over these points and avoid the potential for conflict or criticism by simply asserting that critically analysing research narratives is part and parcel of the life of qualitative scholars (particularly for those who identify as critical), and that such differences require careful thought and sensitivity. Yet, this is a sidestep and an underestimation of the struggles involved in trying to remain respectful of how participants are represented while still interrogating the data for new and potentially unpopular findings. These vexing issues affected our consideration of how to report our findings. In this paper we confront these questions more directly.

Our feminist, (critical) animal studies work shows us many glaring inconsistencies in the discourses of dairy farmers: farmers who purport to love, yet kill, their cows; and of 'animal welfare science' that utilises the language of care while addressing how better to squeeze more productivity out of animals' bodies. Our (intersectional) feminism, developed over decades in and beyond the academy, has trained us to analyse gender-based oppression and privilege, but also the institutional nature of all forms of oppression, wherever and however they occur. This means, for example, that we recognise that no matter how lovely individual farmers were to talk with, gendered relations existed and the animals on their farms were still part of an 'animal

industrial complex'; a system that normalises and condemns cows to mostly short, confined lives and early, brutal deaths. We couldn't help but see the oppression of the 'real' animals behind the romantic rhetoric and discourse of 'humane farming' and 'happy animals'. Perhaps it is because of the potential emotional fallout from asking hard questions about dairy farming that we could see how others could paint us as feminist killjoys (Ahmed; Gillespie) and vegan killjoys (Twine), or worse, traitors to our participants. We press on in this knowledge, appreciative of the intense emotions often tied up in discussions of animal agriculture, including dairy farming.

Kindness and cruelty as processes

The Oxford dictionary defines kindness as 'the quality of being friendly, generous, and considerate', while to be cruel is 'Wilfully causing pain or suffering to others'. Historically, the practice of likening animals to machines (Cole) has enabled dairy farmers to largely avoid questions about animal cruelty and continue making their living from processes born of the control, confinement and enslavement of cows, calves and bulls. For the most part, they have been able to do so without it reflecting badly on themselves and their ethics. Yet, as indicated in the introduction, this Cartesian, mechanistic view of animals has begun to erode.

Dairy farming practices that once did not need to be justified must now be explained by farmers and consumers alike (Cole). Many of the mechanisms used in these processes of justification have been identified by psychologists, particularly when it comes to rationalising the 'meat paradox' (i.e., consuming animals' body parts while simultaneously acknowledging that farmed animals are sentient beings with their own interests) (for example, Bastian et al.; Joy; Oleschuk). By and large these studies show that various 'techniques of neutralisation' are used. First described by Sykes and Matza in their early studies of juvenile delinquency, these techniques were ways for young actors to acknowledge that their behaviour was wrong but to offer alternative scripts that neutralised this fact, such as blaming others, or pointing to victimless crimes (Sykes and Matza). In a similar fashion, the psychological literature that has reported on rationalisations regarding the paradox involved in 'loving' animals while still consuming meat, show that such techniques are used to normalise apparent contradictions and

justify the act(s) that serves to present their users in a favourable light. Oleschuk et al. link these individual, psychological, mechanisms to broader ‘cultural repertoires’ such as ‘consumer sovereignty’, such as the right to choose to eat meat. They point out that such repertoires function not only to abrogate individual responsibility for animal suffering but also to ‘obfuscate citizenship responsibilities to the environment, animals, and distant others’ (Oleschuk et al. 6).

The farmers we spoke to in this study held seemingly contradictory views about their animals. On the one hand, many recounted stories about cows as individuals; stories illustrative of emotional connections they felt towards them. Several dairy farmers we interviewed, particularly the women, referred to chosen ‘house cows’ as members of their family who in their own words they ‘loved’. For instance:

A: Yeah, I love cows.

Q: You do?

A: Yeah, cows are ... it sounds weird – I’m not really an animal person, don’t really like cats and dogs, but I love cows. (current female dairy farmer)

This love of cows was often mentioned in terms of the need to manage their welfare, to care for them:

My husband loves cows, he’s a dairyman, he is a farmer, he loves cows, he knows them all, like he can tell you a lot about them, so obviously at any time that they’re unwell, that is upsetting and stressful, because he doesn’t want to see the welfare of a cow being poor. (current female dairy farmer)

This ‘love’ of cows rested upon a recognition of their individuality, their personality and their own capacity for emotions:

So, she [cow] certainly had a personality yes. Oh dear. Oh boy. Oh they’re very, very, very lovely. It was a good time. I feel quite privileged actually that we, that we did it and we didn’t go looking for, to have cows but I’m so thrilled we did. It’s a special part

of our lives. I've heard my husband say that to people too when we talk about cows and having a house cow or two yes. (retired 'dairy farmer's wife')

They're pretty clever. I don't know how much detail you want to go into. But my husband, because he is the one that milks twice a day every day, and I help when he needs me to. He has such an affinity with the cows that recently one was trying to calve and couldn't, and I tried to help her, and she wouldn't lie down to let me help her, and then I called him and he came in ... and said 'Smokey, if I'm going to help you you'll have to lie down' and she walked over, lay down and let him help her. (retired female dairy farmer)

Getting to know cows by watching them interact with their calves, and learning from their predictably gentle ways was also mentioned by one of the current female dairy farmers we interviewed, which we also read through the lens of kindness:

When there's calves [I] invite people to come and see the milking process. You've never seen anything more beautiful in your life. The mum's coming up and there's all these little babies running through them and you can see them going, get up here.

People and children who may even not have had a great life or people – adults who haven't had a great life – they teach – they teach you so much. That's what I say to them, I can go and sit in that dairy and watch the cows and they will teach me more than probably reading books. (current female dairy farmer)

While these examples of kindness seem at odds with the generalised and routinised cruel practices that dairy cows are subject to, and at odds with the data we describe above, Phillips and Taylor note how the performance of kindness can demonstrate one's own moral worth more than the care per se for the other. This kind of performative kindness is redolent of that shown historically by colonisers' and missionaries' attempts to be kind to 'Others' 'for their own good' (Heron). Rooted in bourgeois philanthropic ideals rather than a true interest in the wellbeing of others, this form of kindness rests upon constructing the 'Other' as docile, passive and in need of help and charity from others, rather than deserving of rights (also see Heron). It is

a form of kindness that is one aspect of the ‘humane’ and ‘animal welfare’ paradigms, in that it allows the construction of animals as passive recipients of human benevolence without troubling the actual practices that animals are subjected to.

We make this case because all participants ultimately talked about their animals as commodities who ‘worked’ to produce a livelihood for them. Given the precepts of modern dairy farming, several farmers also acknowledged that they ‘needed’ to subject them to harmful practices such as dehorning, separating calves from cows, and ultimately killing them. When considered in depth, these instances of cruelty and kindness seem to be highly contradictory. After all, it would be highly unusual to claim to love a family member, subject them to invasive ‘treatments’ without pain relief, and then sell them at an early age in order to profit from their untimely death. Yet rarely did the farmers we spoke to openly acknowledge such inconsistencies. Some moved quickly but uncomfortably past them in the interviews. Even more participants ignored them entirely, re-interpreting awkward questions or changing the subject. This was made feasible by the various techniques of neutralisation often used to smooth over or work around inconsistencies and contradictions, techniques that, incidentally, suggest an awareness of the inconsistencies which may well offer potential avenues for change.

As a process, techniques of neutralisation involve five (potentially overlapping) possibilities (Sykes and Matza), some or all of which were used by our participants. The first move is to push away ethical and moral responsibility, which can be done through claiming that any harms to animals on their farms are/were beyond their control. Next is the minimisation or denial of others’ injury, which in the case of dairy farming, can be done through the assumption or assertion that animals aren’t harmed (or harmed for long), ‘get used to it’ or ‘don’t know any different’. The denial of the victim is the third possibility. While none of our participants asserted that animals ‘deserved’ to be dehorned, forcibly milked or sent for slaughter, they all assumed that this was inevitable, simply ‘the lot’ of a farmed animal. Projecting anger or blame at those who condemn them is the fourth technique of neutralisation. This was evident at some participants’ outrage at the work and messages of animal advocates. The fifth technique is to justify one’s actions through appealing to the greater good (see Sykes and Matza). In the case of

dairy farming it can be done by underlining how important dairy is for human health, human employment possibilities and human farming traditions. We now explore these possibilities in more detail.

As already suggested, one common technique was the idea that any harmful practices were for the cows 'own good'. For example:

So, they [the public] think that, I don't know, you're taking the cow off the mother, and it's cruel, but they don't understand if you leave it on, it doesn't get its milk. It could die. It could get disease. Like, all the reasons that farmers know and are educated on, the public is not. (current female dairy farmer)

Here, farmers invoke their specialised knowledge to explain the necessity of their behaviour which neutralises any cruelty involved as 'incidental' to the greater good of looking after the animals' broader welfare.

Unlike the public who use various strategies to avoid association of meat with animal bodies when addressing the 'meat paradox' (Bastian et al.), farmers openly acknowledged that their animals would be killed in order to be eaten. This did not stop them, however, from invoking the idea that this, too, was done for the cows' 'own good'.

But there's a certain reality with farming that animals are going to be consumed in some way, because it's wrong to actually leave an animal – I have this conversation with other people from animal ethics – so, it's wrong to leave animals to just live out a natural life, which means that they're no good for meat – for consumption of anything. So, they've lived a life being a dairy cow, they retire and die on a land and then just go into landfill. Whereas it's better where they'll be used for humans. (current female dairy farmer)

As Vaca-Guzman and Arluke note when discussing the neutralising techniques of animal hoarders, this is a 'Good Samaritan' strategy whereby 'considering an ill deed as a necessary part of a larger virtuous act, the wrongfulness of the performance is diluted by the honorable purpose' (344). This extended beyond the animals who were killed for their body parts to those who were killed on the farm due to ill health or inability to produce enough milk:

Q: Do you have emotions when you have to shoot one of them?

A: Oh, yeah. But you just got to get over it. That's part of farming that you've just sort of grown up with that you know that's got to happen. And that's same with – same with the dogs. Same with ... dogs – the dog comes to its age where it's too old and you think it's going to be uncomfortable and in pain. Just off – best off putting it out of its misery. It's no good and it kills you doing it, but it's best for everybody in the long run – same with the cows. (current male dairy farmer)

This justification of biopower – or managing the entirety of an animal's life from birth to death (Taylor; Wadiwel 'Biopolitics') – was often extended from being in the animal's best interests to ensuring farmed animals 'have a nice life'. For instance:

The dry cows and the heifers just eat sleep poop, they have a pretty casual life. Particularly over the winter period, but because we've had such a wet spring, we've left them down there a bit longer. We agist [graze] cows at a property down at XX. So, a lot of our heifers, our rising heifers, are all down there just fattening up, growing, maturing, and a lot of our mated heifers go down there as well. Our dry cows we tend to keep in a pen fairly close to home. We're of course watching for any signs of labour or distress or milk fever or anything like that. ... they've got a pretty casual lifestyle, they don't work too hard. (current female dairy farmer)

These 'logics of domestication' rest upon the control of animal bodies and can be seen as a form of biopower (Wadiwel 'Biopolitics') or agricultural power (Taylor). In turn this is clearly linked to the logic(s) of capitalism where animals are commodities enrolled in the (re)production of profit (Twine, 'Animals as Biotechnology'; Wadiwel 'Biopolitics'). Despite this connection having the potential to undo the careful neutralisation work of farmers some made it explicit, for instance:

I've always had the attitude, they work for me. They're in my best interests, don't get me wrong, I'm not inhumane against the cows or anything, but it's a business. (current male dairy farmer)

However, this connection is carefully made using the framework of animal welfare to again diminish its effects. Extending this technique of neutralisation yet further we also heard how animals had nice lives, being looked after ‘for their own good’ because farmers’ codes of welfare were higher than those of others in the food production chain:

It’s a bit like we grow our own vegetables. We eat them. We grow our own animals we eat them, but it’s done in a nice way. 90% of the animals that are slaughtered on this place go out with a mouthful of grain or a mouthful of hay and they don’t even see it coming. It’s all relaxed. It’s done in an environment where it’s extremely friendly and it’s never stressed. When you think of the animals that are loaded in the yard and then they are loaded on the truck and then they’re off to market and then they are in the sale yards for 12 hours before they are sold and then they are loaded on another truck. That’s an extremely stressful thing for an animal. (current female dairy farmer)

The welfare that farmers made reference to, however, tended to be solely the physical welfare of their cows. Welfare was, for example, associated with growth as in ‘[we] make sure that they’re happy and growing and feeding’. In turn, this was linked to the idea of ‘better’ meat:

I think, overall animal welfare makes better milk and meat, because if the cow is happy, she’s productive. (industry consultant)

As Te Velde et al. note, reducing animal welfare to matters primarily of animal health is an effective strategy for farmers to deal with any ambivalence they may feel about the way they treat their animals. That they are ambivalent is clear from the numerous instances of kindness we witnessed or heard about during the field work. During the interviews the farmers made it clear that they did indeed see their cows as sentient, emotional, and often individual beings. In part this was demonstrated through the many acts of kindness we saw or heard about from the farmers themselves and/or from their partners. This was often presented as a ‘bond’ between farmer and cow, as in the example below:

And I believe that that's because they [dairy farmers] have such a bond [with their animals]. They know who you are. The smaller ones that I deal with all the time, the babies, they know me, they know my voice. (current female dairy farmer)

In part this explains why the apparent contradiction between such beliefs of animal individuality, sentience and emotion, and their on-farm treatment can be rationalised by farmers. In her consideration of the mechanics of 'simultaneously writing and not writing about power within acts of interpersonal and systemic acts of violence' (48), Nekeisha Alayna Alexis points out that:

Animal agriculture and agribusiness, including farms with the least cruelty, depend on repressive measures. They require reproductive tyranny such as control over sexual partnerships; forced mating and insemination; extensive monitoring of fertility; and restraints against childrearing ... Many humane farmers also employ the same techniques as industrial operations. (49)

As a result, she argues, even conscious omnivores, i.e., those who, like the farmers we interviewed, acknowledge the sentience and individuality of farmed animals and have no issue with killing and eating them so long as it is done 'humanely' (Alexis), need mechanisms to manage the 'meat paradox' (Loughnan et al.; Morgan and Cole). Or, as Cole puts it, 'The manifest tension between treating other animals as if they were machines while making claims about their welfare as if they were feeling, suffering, beings, begs for resolution' (89).

The data we have presented here on the mechanisms by which farmers neutralise, or manage, the tensions inherent to their work are individual actions. They do not, however, exist in a vacuum and are part of the broader socio-cultural discourses that legitimate human exceptionalism generally and human dominion over animals specifically (for example, Plumwood, 'Integrating'). As such our work can be read alongside that of others (for example, Chrulew and Wadiwel; Thierman; Wadiwel 'The War Against Animals') who have used a Foucauldian perspective to consider the revisionism necessary to maintain some semblance of moral comfort about the way 'farmed' animals are treated. Earlier we spoke of the neutralising technique of likening farmed animals to machines so as to sidestep ethical questions about animal cruelty. Cole, for example, points out that this is predicated upon a denial of their sentience,

emotions and subjectivity, all of which have been challenged in recent times by notions of animal-welfare-friendly discourse. As a result, he writes:

In conceding sentience and an expressive self, while *continuing to confine and kill* for gustatory pleasure, ‘happy meat’ and ‘animal friendly’ welfare discourses attempt to remoralize the exploitation of ‘farmed’ animals in such a way as to permit business as usual, with the added ‘value’ of ethical self-satisfaction for the consumer of ‘happy meat’. (Cole 89)

LaVeck refers to the defences needed to maintain the fiction that farmed animals ‘have nice lives’ as Orwellian doublespeak whereby corporations are able to take, pervert, and use notions advocates fought long and hard to get into public consciousness, such as animal wellbeing. He argues that the ‘meat paradox’ is reframed into discourse that misleads consumers to believe that it is only factory farming that they should be worried about (LaVeck). We certainly found family-based dairy farms romanticised and placed by participants in stark contrast to factory farms. Yet, many of their farming processes are the same.

Rather than actually challenging the myriad instances of animal abuse found in modern animal farming practices, invocations of animal welfare actually ensure that ‘the treatment of animals is in *conformity* with prevailing rationalities of power’ (Wadiwel, ‘Biopolitics’ 86). This power operates in the service of capitalism to allow the mass production, regulation and killing of animals for profit while sanitising the processes to make them palatable to those who would have us believe they/we care about animal welfare. As Cole argues, ‘How much more economical it would be if power relations could be configured in such a way as to give the impression that interventions in the lives of others were really in accordance with their natures, needs and wishes. Thus: pastoral power, ‘animal centred’ welfare reform and “happy meat”’ (89).

Conclusion

In this paper we have examined some of the methods farmers have used to maintain contradictory attitudes of kindness and cruelty towards the animals in their care. Some of the mechanics of power that uphold the current animal industrial complex have been illuminated

because they need to be understood, challenged and changed if we are to see meaningful improvement in the lives of animals currently being used by humans. To paraphrase Stănescu, humans purporting to love (individual) animals on the farm is simply not enough. Critically reflecting on the neutralising techniques used to sidestep ethical questions is part of this process. It is a process that takes openness and courage, given it can lead to significant changes in beliefs, behaviours and identities, and incur mainstream disapproval if not ridicule. Future research might well focus on two main areas. Firstly, as we noted earlier, the very existence of a suite of neutralisation techniques suggests that farmers are aware of the inconsistencies that underpin their work and relationships with their cows. This may open up an ‘entry point’ for discussions and actions that can help cows currently living on dairy farms. For example, it might be that activists and farmers can find common ground around their ‘love’ of the cows (we acknowledge this is contentious), which leads to fruitful collaborations enabling farmers to transition away from dairy. Advocacy groups could work with farmers to help re-home ‘un-needed’ animals through this transition period, for instance.

Further consideration of how these techniques are upheld and protected by different groups, not just farmers, with a view to disrupting them, may offer alternative insights into potential avenues for change. This may include, for example, consumers, as we all – at a societal level – play a part in maintaining the various strategies needed to deny animals their rights and to position them as existing for human use. Reaching groups that are explicitly committed to social, animal and/or environmental justice but who continue to consume meat, dairy and other animal-based products are other possibilities, as many members of these groups understand the importance of empathy and kindness but have not applied their concerns to farmed animals. This includes reaching out to those who help rescue and rehouse companion animals, while ignoring the welfare of other animal groups, through practices such as fundraising activities that involve meat barbeques (or in the Australian vernacular, ‘a sausage sizzle’).

Exploring what happens when individuals no longer use techniques of neutralisation to deny the rights of farmed animals is another possibility. For example, exploring what happens when those embroiled in the animal industrial complex remove themselves from farming and by so doing divest themselves of the guilt associated with living in a contradictory space of ‘loving’

animals yet using and ultimately killing them. Tracking the ways former farmers turned vegan activists contribute to the disruption of these techniques would be one practical example here (see for instance, Capps, ‘Free From Harm’).

Notes

¹ In this context see also Melissa Boyde’s work on ‘The Old Cow Project’ (Boyde).

² The two lead researchers identify as vegan feminists while three of the four research assistants do not.

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