

DOMESTICATION AND HUSBANDRY: BETWEEN GIFT AND DEBT¹

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The utilitarian connection with animals created by animal production systems (industrial and intensive farms), overlooks ten thousand years of shared history with animals, as well as non-economic motivations to work in husbandry. Paradoxically, this utilitarian connection is also used by those who advocate agriculture without husbandry – the promoters of cellular agriculture (Porcher, 2019)². However, farmers' own accounts, as well as what is evident in the reality of working relations between animals and humans, testifies to the purpose of animal husbandry going beyond economic considerations for the farmers as well as for society at large. Animal husbandry is not just about animal production; moreover, these two different types of relationship with farm animals come from different worlds. Animal production essentially comes from the industrial and commercial world, even if some of the stakeholders do hold and truly demonstrate altruistic motivations on a personal level – “to feed the world” for example.

The purpose of work, whether or not with animals, is not only to produce, it is also to perform, to be together, to share and to form bonds with others (Dejours, 1993). For most farmers, this “being together” with animals, obscured though it is by the organization of work within animal production systems, is not fundamentally contractual, but it is rooted in engagement, and is thus linked more to the field of primarily moral representations and values, than to the real experience of work. The fact that we live with animals, and that animals participate in social ties in almost every human society, attests to

1 This is a translated and slightly modified version of « L'esprit du don: archaïsme ou modernité de l'élevage? Éléments pour une réflexion sur la place des animaux d'élevage dans le lien social », in (2002) *Revue du MAUSS*, n° 20, p. 45-62, Paris, La Découverte.

2 Cellular agriculture is promoted by animal “defenders” because it allows for the production of animal-free animal products. What matters, then, is less animals and our relations with them (the connection), than the production (utility), even if the price is the disappearance of farm animals.

the existence of a gift connection between some animal species and humans. That the political monkey, as described by Franz de Waal (2002) and other primatologists (Strum, 1995), is capable of managing conflicts, reconciling with adversaries and living contentedly as a group, may suggest, as Alain Caillé proposes (2000, p. 265), that the gift might in fact be rooted in nature. This would also tie in with Jacques Dewitte's analysis of Adolf Portmann's research into auto-representation, "the first donation of appearance" (Dewitte, 1993, p. 32). To my mind, all of this demonstrates – at the very least – that the gift should not be excluded from an analysis of domestication and the relations between humans and animals. It undeniably makes sense for humans, and it very probably makes equal sense for domesticated species, or in other words, for those that live in the human world.

I endeavor to identify, with reference to contemporary gift analysis, the elements in the occupation of livestock farming that most significantly constitute the gift, that is to say, the triple obligation of giving, receiving and returning. This relationship with animals, which interconnects constraint and freedom, instrumental interest and shared pleasure, is, I believe, at the heart of connections between farmers and animals, and has been since the beginning of the process of domestication. Equally, in husbandry, the connection is about more than the asset. It is the gift that makes sense of our relations with animals, not the asset.

Husbandry references both what Alain Caillé calls primary sociality (relations with parents, friendship ties), and secondary sociality (working or volunteering in associations, organ donations, etc.). It has primary sociality because humans and animals have invested in a relationship which will necessarily, for better or for worse, involve affectivity because it engages the body, and it engages subjectivity. A great number of livestock farmers have a friendly, affective feeling towards their animals. This is because representations of animals are very close to representations of humans, as both are sentient living beings, and because of the perception of a shared capacity to experience pleasure and pain. At the same time, the animals participate in the work of the farmer and/or the work collective and thus the market economy. Working with animals guarantees the farmer an income, that is to say it allows them a living. The economic tie with the animal must therefore be integrated into exchanges within the affective domain, or in other words, primary sociality – and my research has tended to show that what comes first in relationships, what indeed is at the basis of sociality, as Alain Caillé emphasizes, is that there would be no secondary sociality without the base of

primary sociality. Or, as Adolf Portmann (1996) demonstrates, the expression of the functional rests on the basis of the non-functional; and conversely, affective relationships must be integrated into the relevant exchanges of secondary sociality. There is no split between these two types of sociality, rather, the farmer oscillates between one and the other depending on the content of the work and the production system.

THE GIFT OF LIFE

The original gift for many livestock farmers is life. Farmers give life to their animals, firstly because they make decisions on reproduction and genealogy, which places the animal in a symbolic transmission space, and secondly, because to a greater or lesser degree depending on the species of animal in question, farmers are involved in the birth as they participate in the delivery of baby animals. It should be noted that this involvement of the farmer's body in the birth strongly engages affectivity, and is implicated in the attachment between farmer and animal:

There are the joys, vital moments such as births – the calving – which are impossibly intense moments of life.

This might seem stupid, but up till now, for all the animals that I have bred, I'm their mother, not spiritual but affective.

The gift of life is important in these accounts because it is one of the pillars of engagement between farmers and their animals. Giving life means engaging in the whole of that life, it means being responsible. Protecting, caring for, feeding... breeding, all of this is therefore a moral duty to self, *i.e.* an ethical approach to the profession and an engagement with the animal:

I will stay [...] to fulfil my engagements as a farmer, to not let the animals down.

By giving them life, farmers are committed to the animals, and the animals can count on the farmer in their turn: they must "live up to the task", they are "at their service". The gift of life that animals have received and which they hold the farmer responsible for, and the protection and the care that the farmer provides

for them daily, engage them in the counter-gift. The affective engagement in work is therefore seen as reciprocal and shared:

The animals understand me, there is a return.

The way of working with animals is that the animal has an advantage over the man, and it is this – every step you take towards the animal, he returns to you. Humans are not always on that level, but animals, for sure, everything we do for them, they return it.

The double worry is keeping animals so that they live well, that they find pleasure in living under my care and, at the same time, that they allow me to make an honest living.

Equally, the involvement can be – at least – reciprocal:

I leave them in peace, and I feel that the animals must return peace to me.

Above all, the exchange that stems from the gift of life is communication. The first counter-gift the domestic animal gives is to agree to live, and to live in the human domain: a world with human meaning. This is exactly what non-domestic species do not accept. On first stepping out in life, the farm animal becomes part of the animal world through its mother, the flock or herd – the world of its species – as well as the human world whose language it learns to understand. It is plunged into a world of meaning that, to a great extent, does not come from its nature. Having a name, and responding to it, does not come from the natural world of the cow or the sow; nor does accepting the rules of work or anticipating the wishes or desires of the farmer (Porchet and Schmitt, 2012). This communication is primarily based in affectivity. The farmer is affectively involved with the animal and does not feel this to be unreciprocated. An analysis of behavior mediating the function of attachment between farmers and animals appears to show that animals demonstrate attachment to farmers, and that farmers who are attached to their animals are deeply convinced of this:

I really like them and I am sure that my sows really like me. [...] They can tell if we are calm or not, if we love them or not, animals know when they are not loved.

For myself, I believe that they know that I am not an animal, they know where I am. I believe they understand me perfectly. I love them a lot, and they love me a lot, I am sure of it.

The connections to animals associated with primary sociality can be seen in the numerous analogies farmers make between animals and the family:

[...] but this kind of extension, it's a little like family, it's a little like when we die, our children will still be there and they will continue to give us life, and in the same way the animal, when he leaves my place, in some way he will continue to live through his descendants.

With animals, it's like the family [...] there is a sort of respect and confidence. It's reciprocal.

This analogy evokes both the responsibility of the farmer for the duration, and also the reciprocal nature of the ties and the idea of trust. This trust, which results from authority relations between a farmer and their animals, is given and received – or otherwise – when the relationship begins, and it is maintained on a daily basis. Trust does not impede the caution that comes from a thorough knowledge of the animals, which willingly or not, can be a source of danger for a farmer:

[...] he is handsome, he is so muscular, he is magnificent to look at, but you have to be wary, he is a bull after all.

It's a reciprocal confidence, an exchange, it's like between people [...] you must not go back on your word, it's this that creates trust.

For farmers, the counter-gift is legitimately expected and received, and it reengages them with the gift cycle. Certain relational events tied to the slaughter of animals shed particular light on these types of relations. For example, the slaughter of an animal for “counter-performance” – the slaughter of a cow or a sow who “doesn't take”, insemination, is postponed, in order “to give them a second chance”. This repeating gift of life, this delay of the slaughter – which in the current context of the organisation of work, let it be remembered, goes entirely against the economic interests of the farmer – leads to an increased counter-gift from the animal.

Trust therefore allows recognition, which greatly contributes to the counter-gift:

[...] they recognize me [...] when we feel that the animals know us, it's quite gratifying [...] they know their name, they listen, they understand that it's them, they turn their heads, they understand the intonation of the voice perfectly, and their name, perfectly...

This equally demonstrates that the farmer's gift and the animal's counter-gift operate around the gift of life:

[...] we have something in return: life, in fact.

This life that animals give to human beings comes not only in the form of a feeling of real life, an extreme wellbeing and density of experience that farmers testify to, but also in the perspective of global society, in the form of the life given to us by the food the animals supply us with, and which is directly or indirectly tied to their death.

THE DEATH OF ANIMALS, REPRODUCTION OF LIFE, AND THE SUSTAINABILITY OF THE EXCHANGE

The importance of the place of life in exchanges between humans and animals allows us to understand the death of farm animals as a gift relationship, as for these animals that are born, live and produce:

[...] we must not delude ourselves, we can't breed them to keep them.

The frequent observation, often one of powerlessness ("sadly", "unfortunately"...), which gives life greater value than nature does, shows that the death of the animal is not the end point of the farmer's work. Farmers do not breed animals *to* kill them. Montaigne's claim that death is the end, and not the purpose of life is equally true in husbandry, just as the purpose of life with a pet animal is not to have it put down at the vet's, even though for the majority of pets, this will be how their lives end.

It is therefore not death itself that is a problem for many farmers, whether professional or amateur, but the killing, because killing is not the same as dying. The killer kills and the animal dies, and not the other way round. Symbolically, (and I am remembering here that the gift is considered by Mauss to be a social fact of a symbolic type) we can see the primary asymmetry in the original gift of life by the farmer. The farmer gives life and then takes it back. The legitimacy of the killing, which does not happen without affective suffering, sometimes requiring a real mourning process from the farmer, rests on the initial gift, the quality of the exchange and on the respect for the animal while it is alive and at the moment of its death. This is why the slaughter of the animal must make sense for those who kill, the killer themselves, and the community that they kill for. Fundamentally, the killing has no sense for those who die and who refuse to die, as it is undeniable that the animal does not consent to die but that we deprive them of life by coercion or by trickery³. It seems clear, because it is not the purpose of the work of farming, but the ultimate and the most painful terms of the exchange, that killing animals must be understood for what it is for many farmers: an undesired violence. Death exists. It is undesirable but has sense when the life has sense.

It is precisely this sense of life, and therefore the reality – and the scale – of the killing, that today's industrialization of livestock farming is driving farmers to forget. This regulation of death, whether human or animal, is the result of our industrial and techno-scientific times. Death, whether the animals' or our own, is no longer in plain sight and we are losing the words to talk about it. Marie Fr  d  rique Bacqu   (1992) observed that starting from the World War I, there has been a decline in the vocabulary tied to death and a growing denial of it. Death has been taken to the hospitals and has become invisible. In a similar way, the expulsion of slaughterhouses from towns has been accompanied by their semantic neutralization: the slaughterhouse has been integrated into a factory, and it is known by the name of the company. It is no longer a different and particular place of killing. It is simply an element in the process of transforming animals who arrive in these locations in their thousands, in their millions in

3 It should be noted that some farmers and vets, in husbandry conditions where relations between farmers and animals are strong, can see a consent from the animal at their end. This is not based on research but it is a hypothesis, and because we have little knowledge about the way we deal with the death of animals, it merits further study.

the case of poultry, into animal matter which is measured in Carcass Weight Equivalent in commercial exchanges (Porcher, 2003; Jourdan, 2020).

This “animal matter” is today made up of billions of poultry, and millions of pigs, rabbits, cows, sheep and goats that are slaughtered each year in France, to which should be added millions of animals slaughtered in France on a recurring basis for reasons of public health economics. Thus, in 2021, 15 million poultry were slaughtered because of the risk of bird flu, a great many of whom were free range and in good health. There were 767 slaughterhouses for animals destined for butchers in 1980, and now (according to 2019 data) there are no more than 198, of which a growing percentage are private industrial slaughterhouses which produce most of the tonnage. This industrial organisation of death is very difficult to live with for many farmers. Thanks to the concentration of slaughterhouses, and their drastic reduction, farmers are effectively constrained to delegate transportation and slaughter. This development, by removing the possibility of accompanying the animal, gives rise to feelings of guilt and makes the mourning process more difficult:

We make immense abattoirs where the animals wait, they are stressed, it's a catastrophe that all the small slaughterhouses have been lost.

I had sold a cow two days before and I arrived and she was still there, she hadn't been slaughtered yet and still she was there, and I don't like having to live with that.

The concentration of abattoirs and their ever-increasing distance from the farms has led a growing number of farmers to slaughter their animals on the farm even though it is prohibited (Porcher *et al.*, 2014). Since 2019, following action from farmers and associations⁴, a law has allowed farmers to experiment with mobile slaughter solutions.

⁴ In particular, the *Quand l'abattoir vient à la ferme* and the *Confédération Paysanne* associations.

THE IMPOSSIBLE GIFT IN INDUSTRIAL AND INTENSIVE FARMING

Although some producers in industrial farms are satisfied with the approach of agronomic research towards “animal welfare”, farmers who are attached to their animals have long been aware that, “animal welfare” notwithstanding, the prescribed work procedures go counter to the wellbeing of their animals and of themselves. The constant increase in the size of herds, the decrease in the age for slaughter at the insistence of technicians, the break, or reduction of the animal’s ties to nature (particularly in grazing), the increase in the hours of work and the pressure to produce, all of this obliges producers to adopt an attitude towards their animals at work that is contrary to the needs of the animals:

I recognize them less and less because the wheels turn faster and faster, and there are more and more animals.

These developments in the organization of work, which are driving producers to spend less and less time close to each animal, are causing profound changes in communication relations between humans and animals, and in the behavior of animals, and are thus generating suffering for both animals and humans:

I was brutal with the pigs, it’s true, the whole system pushes you to this, and I was on edge all the time [...] it’s the rhythm that’s hard, it’s the endurance, you have to run all day.

Since the 1960s⁵, the question of “animal welfare”, in livestock farming has gone hand in hand with the industrialization process on livestock farms. The question of adaptation has led to a growing number of norms that define and regulate work relations between farmers and animals. Thus, national and European regulations are imposing norms of habitat, feed, “biosecurity”, etc., on farmers, which extend into every area of livestock farming.

5 Ruth Harrison’s book *Animal machines: The new factory farming industry*, published in 1964, denounced the violence in industrial farms that took place in England. This critique was rapidly absorbed into the question of “animal welfare”, or in other words, the adaptation of animals into “production systems”.

These regulations, which particularly concern industrialized and intensive farming, are evidence of the loss of sense in the profession of farming. They demonstrate the break in the ties between the producer and their animals, and the impossibility of the gift within the context of industrial work. The producers of calves, pigs, chickens, turkeys and rabbits for butchery give nothing to the animals, either concretely or symbolically. They give nothing and they receive nothing.

There is no gift on the part of the producer, and no counter-gift on the part of the animal. The work of a factory hand is reduced to a succession of tasks that are defined by the organisation of work procedures, and by regulations. It is not the gift and counter-gift, but work that nevertheless puts humans and animals in the same space, and both are irreducibly affective beings because they are alive and sentient. The repression of affectivity induced by these systems, the impossibility of exchange and communication, the commodification of animals and the contempt that the system as a whole shows them – and the farmer – have produced mental suffering of which the feeling of shame borne by the farmer is a powerful component (Porcher, 2006). This experience of shame is much more visible to the farmer's networks or friends than it is within the technical support whose role consists precisely in putting in place collective strategies that mitigate suffering.

The farmer does not feel adequate for the animals or equal to the job, and this is what causes the shame, *i.e.* “the feeling of their inferiority or their indignity in the opinion of others”. They take from the animal, and they give nothing back. For, as Mauss wrote (1999, p. 258), the unreturned gift makes the person who accepts it inferior, particularly when it is received without the spirit of return. What are the animals going to think of us? A farmer could therefore ask himself: “What can we do in the face of our indignity?”

LIVESTOCK FARMING TODAY: THE ULTIMATE TIME OF COUNTER-GIFT

The gift theory – when related to the persistence of affective ties between farmers and farm animals, and the inter-subjectivity of their relations despite the commodification of the farm animals – and when applied to the history of humans and animals with hypotheses about the beginnings of the domestication process, suggests that this domestication is the creation of a particular social tie that unites humans and animals at the heart of human

societies. In a sense, as Mauss writes, it involves: “Laying down our swords.” It involves constructing a world with animals which will not be one of war but of peace, and peace for life. In sum, it involves, conditionally, making an alliance, placing confidence where there had been distrust, and to quote Mauss (p. 277) again: “There is not a middle ground, to trust yourself completely or to defy yourself completely.”

We can find this feeling about the entire confidence animals place in humans not only from the words of farmers, but also in research and in the testimonies of members of the public who share their life with animals. For the gift not only engages us with farm animals, but also with pet animals and, to my mind, with all animals, because we cannot fail to observe that all are suffering directly or indirectly from the generally negative effects most human activity has had on the natural world. We can enlarge this gift to include wild animals because our *domus* really extends across the whole planet, particularly the land. Our interest in wild animals is neither dietary nor affective, but concerns the diversity of our environment – not as an environment in itself, but as the environment of our life, which we claim for its beauty and for a certain appearance of freedom. Even if the wild animals are no longer free, they are counted, tracked by satellite, and in the case of many species, protected. We have constructed relations based on the gift with all animals, whether farm animals, pets, or wild animals. With each of these type of animal we shift between obligation and spontaneity, between interest and pleasure.

The desire that a large number of livestock farmers express, to be in a gift relationship with animals, demonstrates to what degree industrial systems of animal production are violence that is both concrete, in the context of the organization of work, and symbolic, in the context of our relations with animals and the very meaning of husbandry. We are collectively in the debt of farm animals. By refusing the counter-gift, by persisting in doing what must appear to those who dare to look to be barbarism, we degrade ourselves as human beings, and we demonstrate the fact that we are not “equal to it”, that we are unworthy. It is this that shows we don’t understand the syntax that many farmers and a growing number of members of the public are aware of, or are engaged in: animal protection.

It is therefore not a question of “freeing the animals” and wiping the slate clean by these means. It is not a matter of “feeling even”, of washing our hands of ten centuries of a relationship that has transformed us just as it has transformed the animals. On the contrary, it is a question of returning to the gift cycle, of

giving and receiving once more, and of finding new ways of working and being together with farm animals.

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