



Farms, Landscapes, Food and Relationships

Human/Animal Relationships in Transformation

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Abstract

This chapter offers an overview of understandings of the relations between farmers or farm workers and the animals on their farms. First of all, the character of these relations is found to depend on the type of farm: the species of animals used, the type of animal products that are produced, the scale of production and the system and ideal of operation (e.g. free range, cage based, etc). Within the resulting categories of farms – or animal production operations – there are different ways of characterizing and appreciating human-animal relations. This results in a mixed discourse that may use registers of care, alienation, exploitation, tradition, bond, attunement and technological mediation. This chapter discusses implications of these aspects for understanding (changing) human-animal relations on farms, and based on that the potential for regulating human-animal relations and the ethical experiences these may generate.

Looking beyond the farm, the chapter also reflects on the figure of the consumer and its role in imagining human-animal relations on farms. Or rather the cultural vision of the consumer as part of a human society and its relation to food in general and consequently to food of animal origin. The aim is to give an active role to the consumer especially at a time when the need to seriously consider the role of human beings with respect to the environment and animals - but also in the inequalities that occur between human beings themselves, particularly evident in the food production chains. Arguably scientific research into animal welfare, proposals for technical innovations, and the production of regulations undoubtedly contribute to improving the living conditions of animals; but at the same time also reduce the collective moral tension to increase the quality of life of animals – and the humans involved in caring for them. For this we argue society as a whole to be responsible.

1 – introduction

Many public concerns over animal farming have led to policy measures (air treatment, improved housing) that in turn have led to an increase in scale of farm operations. Whereas arguably it was, at least in part, also a growing sense of the lack of contact between farmer and their animals that with many consumers generated unease over animal products. Large scale intensive farmers can be found to argue their animals couldn't care less about humans: What is important is to provide the animals what they need, the appropriate conditions for production.

This chapter offers a particular ‘cross European’ perspective on transformations in human-animal relations on farms. Or actually two European perspectives, where one author (Santori) is closely involved in Italian rural farming practice as a breeder and veterinarian for over 30 years as well as chairman for over 20 years of the Bioethics Committee for Veterinary and Agri-food issues, the other (Driessen) as a philosopher and cultural geographer who has studied transformations in dairy and pig farming in the Netherlands over the last 15 years.

Through these perspectives we offer an account of the various dimensions of the transformations in human-animal relations that can be discerned on farms. And we conclude by developing an argument of possible ways forward, with a view on connecting experiences - or perhaps rather keeping these experiences in a productive tension. In writing this paper, we found our views to not just add up to a single overview of developments in different geographical regions, but also to diverge on how to describe what is at stake and how to engage with possible ways forward.

In short, Santori has a decades long intimate experience with rural life in Italy, but does not want to produce an ethnographic account of living with animals on the farm, but rather offer rational bioethical arguments in favour of promoting a broad societal understanding of rural lives. Whereas Driessen is also versed in formal bioethics but feels it to be important to draw on more close experiences of life on farms to get a sense of what is transforming. Perhaps Driessen is just seeking ways to evoke romanticized, nostalgic accounts of a premodern ‘countryside’ that in fact was a modern urban imaginary from the get go (Landry, MacLean, and Ward 1999)? While Santori is concerned with the plight of small farmers in remote regions whose hardships that they share with the animals on their farms are worsened by ignorant urban consumers without a proper sense of what it means to care for animals? By presenting our accounts together in this chapter, this could be read as a conversation not just on changing human-animal relations on farms, but also on how to represent these, how to contemplate on what may be lost – and gained – in these transformations, and on the difficulties in engaging with these concerns in the name of policy measures, when what is called for is perhaps not just radical change in modes of animal use, but also/more a matter of broader cultural transformations in how we appreciate food, farmers, animals, and rural life.

2 - Factors determining human-animal relations on farms?

Setting up our discussion, we first of all discuss a range of different ways in which to categorize different types of farms and the human-animal relations that they are based on, and that they (re-)produce. On farms, the relations between humans and animals appear to be in transformation. How to characterize and understand this transformation is not so clear. What are key determining factors? When do gradual changes entail a larger transformation, a tipping point that changes the character of what a farmer is, and how farmers relate to a cow, a pig, a chicken, or multitudes of them.

Species and Scale

Of course, a major determinant of the kind of relation a farmer, or farm worker, may have with the animals they use is determined by the species and the type of product being produced. Dairy cows have a very different life from cattle reared for meat. Laying hens tend to live longer than broiler

chickens. Mink are wild animals that are not interacted with much. Sheep when extensively farmed can live lives that are remote from farmers and at the same time intimately bound with landscapes (Rebanks 2015). And even within species the relation farmers may have with for instance sows used to produce piglets is different, in some ways more personal and involving more time, than the relation with fattening pigs. And within species and products, different breeds can be used in different ways, where e.g. Frisian Holstein cattle can survive under intensive conditions. Beyond a single direction 'relation' defined by the experiences of humans on these farms, e.g. the few minutes that industrial farmers spend with each individual pig in the six months needed for these to grow to their slaughter weight, there is also the question of whether and if at all the pigs take part in this relation, and can be seen to relate to particular humans on the farm.

For each of these species and products, a major factor is an increasing scale of production. Throughout the world a relentless growth in the number of animals that is bred on a single farm has occurred as part of an ongoing intensification of production in which external inputs (feed, fertilizer, antibiotics as growth inducing feed additive, chicks, baby piglets, etc) are bought on markets, and the output, fattened pigs, is slaughtered and packed in large meat packing plants. This scale evidently has effects on the type of relation farmers may have with their animals. In many places these production sites are even no longer designated as 'farms', but e.g. Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs), often critiqued as 'Factory farms' as the sites of systemic abuse of animals, which however is increasingly difficult to establish (Fiber-Ostrow and Lovell 2016).

Some key notions with strong public connotations are associated with a smaller scale of working and an associated combination of rural life and production with 'family farms' that resist a more capital intensive and industrial type of organization. There is a question of course whether this difference in scale and organization entails a genuine difference in the relations between farmers/farm workers and the animals. The 'family' as a unit that owns a farm, and lives next to the production facilities, can be found to operate production facilities with 30.000 pigs or a million laying hens in the 'backyard'. In practice many of these family farms may also be to some extent 'vertically integrated', whereby large conglomerates own the entire production process and the farms are merely sites where the animals are fattened, whose ownership is retained by the supplier and buyer of the finished animal. This reduces the independence and freedom to decide on how to manage their animals, including their time and relation with them. In the Netherlands this form of production is for instance dominant in the veal calf industry. But also in dairy farming it may be difficult to farm without having a close relation with a dairy cooperative, many of which have become global corporate behemoths. Here one can discern a 'peasant' mode of farming with little capital inputs, that is distinct from an entrepreneurial mode, in which for instance cattle is bought from external suppliers rather than bred on the farm (cf. Ploeg 2008). There is a sense in which smaller scale farms allow farmers to know their animals in more intimate ways. As one Dutch dairy farmer explained: "120 cows I can still remember as individuals, I recognize them and have their characteristics in my head, at 140 this is no longer the case." However, in all these forms of production, there still can be an experience by farmers and farm workers of these animals as sentient beings, whereby the subjectivity of animals can be experienced as profoundly present, haunting even, as for instance the feeling of thousands of pigs watching your every movement (Blanchette 2020). Or when pig farms are (regularly) flooded and farmers are forced to individually shoot their animals (Stoddard and Hovorka 2019).

Tools, technologies and automation

To a large extent the scale of operation as discussed in the section above is enabled and determined by particular material conditions and technological innovations. But besides this 'effect', there are various ways in which material and technological changes on farms change the relations that farmers and their animals develop. De Krom (2015) for instance describes how 'stockpersons' as he calls them develop an ambivalent, instrumental yet caring, relationship with animals such as sows, who in turn respond to the material conditions of the farm. This means as part of farming practices the everyday practical work around these sows allows them to be sensorily attuned to their bodily conditions and behaviour. The material set up of the farm makes for certain routinized interactions that facilitate the particular form of care that farmers perceive as their role in maintaining health, productivity, and welfare. In the shift from individual confinement of sows to group housing, De Krom found a series of changes both in how pigs learn to behave in relation to each other, and how farmers learn to detect changes in feeding and other behaviour. There are some paradoxical dynamics, whereby for instance individual housed sows were more easily recognized for always being in the same place, affording a more personal relation than in group housing (Krom 2015).

Another major factor that configures the relations between animals and humans on sites of animal production, is the use of automation. On the one hand this is part of processes of intensification, industrialization and growing capital inputs as sketched above. But more intricate dynamics also occur, for instance when milking robots allow older farmers to continue their practice when their workload becomes more manageable. Many forms of automation, automatic feeders for individual feeding of pigs, robots for milking cows, produce a major increase in data on individual animals, and thereby starting to mediate how farmers know their animals: as data points that can be managed 'by exception'. One only needs to check on the slow growing pig or the cow that the system reports to have udder inflammation. At the same time this does not necessarily mean the 'distance' between farmers and their animals is increased. As for instance milking robots were found by farmers to qualitatively change their relation with the cows, while also the dynamics within the 'herd' changes: farmers report less stress and more relaxed responses to their presence among the cows (Driessen and Heutinck 2015).

In the Netherlands, arguably in the wake of automation, there seems to be a growing interest in offering choice to animals, for dairy cows whether to go out grazing or stay indoors. Meanwhile there are also efforts to harness the natural tendencies of animals to optimize production facilities: e.g. the 'pig toilet' that collects manure in a part of the confined area, utilizing the preference for cleanliness and designated areas to poo and pee. Dairy farmers have en masse adopted 'cow brushes' that allow cows to maintain their hides by standing next to an automated device. The use of remotely controlled one-way gates allows farmers to use the exploratory urge of pigs to sort them individually while they are kept in group housing. One Dutch pig farmer explained he had installed this to make them all move during the night themselves, to be waiting outside on a designated morning for the truck to be collected for slaughter. This farmer explained how the sight of pigs waiting and the sense of making them complicit in their own demise made him feel bad and led him to discontinue this set-up. Here the affective relations, not with individual pigs but with them as a collective, can influence the material configuration under which they are kept.

Welfare regulations and marketing norms

On one hand technological developments on farms can seem driven by expanding capital and growing roles for large corporations – which in turn can be seen as central in producing the conditions for animal suffering (Gunderson 2013). Lowering costs, increasing efficiency, optimizing capital inputs and growing corporate control of farming practices all do not favour the quality of animal lives nor that of their relation with farmers. Meanwhile, especially in for instance the jurisdiction of the European Union, welfare regulations have become increasingly prominent in defining how animals can be kept and thereby structure the conditions under which farmers interact with animals. Battery cages for laying hens for instance have been formally banned in the European Union since 2012. Some farmers could be heard to lament the associated loss of the ability to systematically inspect all the cages and thereby provide individual care for the animals. And even though after these types of bans of close confinement, farmers can be heard to look back realizing former practices were overly cruel, questions can remain on whether the new situation is in every respect an improvement.

There are of course common typologies of production systems that come with strict conditions under which the animals can be kept: free range chickens, free range with outdoor access, pasture fed cows (that according to the marketing based regulations are allowed to graze on a meadow minimally 6 hours a day, 120 days a year). For all legally allowed production systems, specific, often quite detailed welfare regulations have been developed. Often these are defined in terms of the material conditions provided to the animals: adequate water and feed, a minimum space requirement such as one square meter per pig of 110kg. In practice, establishing and maintaining these regulations creates a dynamic of its own. It matters a great deal how animal welfare is actually assessed on farms (Roe, Buller, and Bull 2011). When marketing and consumer preferences are central in defining welfare, that gets defined in ways that are easily commodified and packaged (Buller and Roe 2014). However, what is crucial in these situations is that human-animal relations that ensue on farms can be considered central in determining the welfare of animals that can be achieved on them (Waiblinger et al. 2006). This makes understanding animal welfare, and ongoing transformations on farms with respect to this relation, a central concern.

Various developments can be discerned in a country such as the Netherlands, where increasing scales, modernization and automation is sought to be combined with animal welfare measures. One development is the production of intermediate spaces that blend characteristics of indoor and outdoor, creating simulated versions of outside conditions in an indoor setting that can be controlled and automated: the ‘cow garden’ and the indoor chicken ‘forest’ type space. What these developments entail in practice is contentious. On the one hand these can claim to offer ‘organic’ or ‘free range’ conditions in a controlled environment and can achieve associated welfare claims; whereas the scale and level of automation leaves open questions on the type of care that can be maintained. Meanwhile farmers are experimenting with ways of rearing and using animals in ways that they sense their consumers or non-farming neighbours appreciate: for instance farmers that are creating ‘family herds’ and use ‘foster mothers’ in order to avoid separating calves from their mothers, or at least to avoid confining them individually.

Notwithstanding the ambivalences and nuances in these developments, in general, farms can be seen as developing towards larger scale, more intensive, more automated forms – whereby the relations between farmers and their animals are transforming. How to characterize and evaluate these changing relations?

3 – How to think about the directions of human–animal relations on farms?

Should we see these shifts as part of a broader changing culture of relating to animals? What is the role in this of disparities in income between rural and urban; and what may be considered a growing rift between consumers and producers? And is it informative to frame these changes in even broader terms – as capitalism (Blanchette 2018; Emel and Neo 2015), or modernity (Giedion 2013)? Or what happens if we delve into the details of shifting experiences and various categories of farmers and their animals that we could discern. Within these resulting categories of farms, there appear to be different ways of characterizing and appreciating human-animal relations. This results in a mixed discourse that may use registers of care, alienation, exploitation, tradition, bond, attunement and technological mediation.

Technological futures and genuine traditions?

In Italy, or actually more or less everywhere, a distinction is made between traditional and intensive breeding, often finding an ideological contrast that is the only thing that is grasped by public opinion. Actually, I (Pasqualino) believe, a distinction should be made between true tradition and tradition invented for commercial purposes and between intensity due to genetic and technological developments but in which the animal is considered as such and farms, that must be considered industrial, where genetics and technology may not differ but the mental approach of the breeder and his entourage are completely different. In this case, the animal is seen as a transformation machine while respecting the welfare rules. Once again, only the consumer can intervene and not the possible morality of the farmer who in these cases is culturally involved in the idea of technological "progress".

Much of this depends on how technologies intervene in livestock farming and agriculture in general. Often the relationship between the user and the producer of new technologies is too much mediated by apparatuses, economic development prospects that tend to be managerial and sometimes even ideological visions of agriculture. The figure of the farmer as an entrepreneur who risks his capital by putting his work and that of his employees, as well as the zoo-anthropological relationship with his animals is seen as a mere executor directed in his choices by regulations and public economic contributions.

A greater direct contact between the world of research and the world of agricultural production made with maximum transparency and public visibility would benefit an overall improvement of the system and could also bring to the attention of the consumer this aspect of the food production chain that he feeds with his consumption.

A culture that does not know how to value animals

It is to be thought that a large part of the phenomenon in which farmers – for instance in rural Italy - are less and less in a position to care for their animals is attributable to intellectual inattention towards animals. Widening the horizon to a broader scope than that of farm animals and therefore to animals living in the homes of citizens of richer countries, some data are objective and measurable. The number of animals of wild species kept in captivity is much higher than in the past and this is clearly maltreatment. Even more evident should be the condition of continuous suffering imposed, deliberately but at the same time without particular public awareness, on dogs and cats with breed-related diseases such as brachycephalus dogs, whose skulls have been bred in a way that results in them having constant trouble breathing (British Veterinary Association n.d.). In a society where people with a high interest and even love for animals cannot find what is highly problematic when it is present in their own homes, it is difficult to create the vision of a correct relationship between the purchase of the final product of food and the long and complex breeding conditions far up in the chain of production (Evans and Miele 2012).

As an undercurrent of these developments and categorizations, arguably a profound transformation has occurred. On this point I [Pasqualino] must say that I have a certain emotional involvement, perhaps not very academic, as a breeder and veterinarian. Over the years I have seen the increasing difficulties of breeders and farmed animals. Many farms have been progressively closed often with the economic bankruptcy of entrepreneurs and the average life of animals has progressively decreased. Both things, but above all the first, are not at the center of the public debate. The animal welfare policies, although positive and necessary, in my opinion, are unable to transform the trend, in fact somehow confirm it by identifying a new element of operations in breeding, the result of new areas of research and with the assignment of tasks to specialized technicians. In the meantime, the production price policies are always the same with the continuous erosion of the profitability of the farms in the less suitable areas. On the contrary, in the most suited areas to breeding there is the problem of pollution produced by the farms themselves which have grown due to the commercial success they have achieved.

Consumer awareness, animal welfare and farmer-animal relations

The progressive and excessive industrialization of livestock farms and the consequent treatment of the animals as "production machines" worries the Italian and European citizens, but the animal welfare policies, meritoriously developed over the last few decades, have not been of fully understood by consumers. Expressions such as "animal welfare" in this sense are misleading, because the well-being we are talking about is very different from that of the well-known human "wellness centres", suggesting flourishing or even luxury. Consumers in the European Union are regularly asked in Eurobarometer surveys what their views are on animal welfare, or what their 'willingness is to pay for animal welfare and the environment (Law 2009). But they are never morally involved with regard to their responsibilities; this has not configured them as experiencing a position of genuine engagement. The problem, however, is much wider than the one directly related to food of animal origin, even if the ethical problem remains greater for them. The food that consumers inevitably have to buy in order to live, has a long journey to make, which we call the supply chain. Consumer information is insufficient and this has been talked about for years.

Everything points to the fact that the situation will remain as it is if the consumer does not take on an active attitude. We believe that this is a pressing reason to acquire an active attitude and be critical, and not just for reasons of health or food quality, but also due to ethical issues. By buying one food instead of another you are endorsing genuine misdeeds. The consumption of food compared to other consumption has different characteristics because food is indispensable to survive and because it is permeated with injustices in the various stages of production to use. The producers, i.e. the people who work, the animals on the farms and the natural environment that is involved are so vulnerably and weak that they are subjected to harassment that can only be countered with the strong participation of consumers, that would need to become true judges of what occurs throughout the supply chain.

The lack of information provided is accompanied by a lack of interest in really knowing about food production, beyond ideological stances for or against this and that. After all, in rich countries the food has never been so abundant, varied and cheap in all of history and the general public does not get that the situation could get worse in the future as well as being unjust at the moment. The long supply chain makes the analysis of the steps difficult but also the short supply chain requires the moral concerns that cannot be encapsulated in the price-quality ratio alone. We believe that the citizen-consumer has not only the right to be informed, but also the duty to seek information, and the moral responsibility for the practical fallout of his choices about the life of the vulnerably and unrecognised part of the supply chain.

Human beings working in agriculture (generally the poorest half of the world's population living in the countryside), animals from increasingly industrialised farms and the natural environment, even if with different ethical values and with different power relationships between them, suffer the same fate: they are unknown and unrecognised in their not very bucolic condition. Very often for the farmers and other humans involved in agricultural production in remote rural areas this means low income, a lot of intense work and no security.

What is needed to improve conditions on these farms, both for humans and animals, is a genuine paradigm shift, a change in our mental approach, and the initiation of a cultural debate on what is inherent in the human biological condition such as eating, but which in rich countries is now taken for granted but for gastronomic refinement and elite products. Proactive attention to the purchase of food and consumers who actively takes responsibility for their choices could have the practical effect of generating a virtuous cycle on the upstream elements, whereby farmers become eager not to disappoint those who judge them.

Better dividing the profits from the weaker parts does not necessarily have to increase prices but this possibility should not be ruled out, as for the population, the rich, spending on food has a much lesser impact on income than in the past and that the poorer populations live in rural areas from where, for a long time now, the trend has consolidated to leave rural areas and in many cases become urban poor with other socio-economic problems to prioritize.

Rethinking 'food quality' as relational

Can the conditions on farms, and the plights of farmers, farm workers and animals, be an occasion to reflect on the concept of the food chain as a relationship of co-responsibility and interdependence?

Can this chain be the site of a true exercise of human solidarity, renewing the biological link between human beings and the life of the planet? Can food – experienced as entangled with lively relations - provide moral and aesthetic satisfaction other than just satiating oneself or enjoying the sense of the taste or respect the dictates of a fashion? What is at stake are just moral requirements in the evaluation of a new form of "quality".

In fact, the problem of the economic and social difficulty of food producers is not only of breeders but also of agricultural producers in general, in Europe and all over the world. The poorest part of the world population lives in the rural area and the phenomenon of abandonment of the countryside is increasingly evident. I don't think we can really change things if we don't have the willingness of the citizen-consumer to be involved and responsible. At least in Italy, however, there is a tendency to make the consumer think that all his sense of responsibility can be reduced to reading quality labels that proliferate on the basis of food, health, ethical choices, etc. but without knowing or even trying to know what has happened over the millennia since the fundamental political event in human history consisted in the changes in the social order produced by the domestication of animals and plants (Scott 2017). From which it follows the current society and all its problems.

Add to this that with regard to the consumption of products of animal origin it is difficult to make in-depth ethical assessments on the relationship between humans and animals because it is very easy to fall into the simplistic and misleading contrast between omnivores and vegans. So what to do? I believe that beyond the description of the state of the art, it is necessary to define a possible future work perspective that can make an increased consideration of animals truly possible.

4 – Conclusion: how to interpret farmer-animal relations?

What may be ways to draw on particular notions to describe the relationships that the farmers struggling in rural areas have with their animals? Especially also as it relates to the landscapes and (human and nonhuman) communities they live in. How to describe the role of humans and animals as active and agential, shaping and being shaped by landscapes, traditions, etc? And can we consider these still as valid groundings of contemporary human animal relations, or are these traditional relations about to disappear and no longer experienced as economically meaningful – or is this buying into notions of progress and improvement that precludes seeing the complexities and blends of technology and tradition, intimate relations and intensification?

John Berger, a critic of modern human-animal relations as (re-)produced in zoos, toys, urban pets, and industrial farming, wrote about his small scale traditional farmer neighbours in a village in the French Massif Central. The oft quoted bit sets up the misunderstanding of farmer-animal relations as a form of urban alienation: "A peasant becomes fond of his pig and is glad to salt away its pork. What is significant, and is so difficult for the urban stranger to understand, is that the two statements in that sentence are connected by an and and not by a but" (Berger 2009).

I, (Clemens) have been wondering about the underlying - or is it overarching, or somehow thereby overly abstracting? - question of whether this form of relating is still something we can do in modernity. Or how actually to ask this question. Is this a form of life urban moderns still somehow

have 'access' to, or could recreate, and if not, how did we lose it? Is this premodern form of farming in an intimate connection with animals a relation that we should hold up as an ideal, a model for understanding where farming is going?

We could understand it in terms of tradition, heritage, small scale, non-capitalist. Where the knowledge of how to manage animals in a particular landscape creates a fiercely independent position for farmers embedded in local communities (Rebanks 2015; Laurie 2020).

Here the relation between farmer and animal, and the actively mutual character of this relation, is key to understand what it means to farm. The landscape and the kind of food it affords structures the relations between animals and humans, in a mutually beneficial relation that is not defined by total control, but to some extent shared vulnerability, even when power is not symmetrically distributed. This type of relation can be characterized in terms of care (Harbers 2002; Mol, Moser, and Pols 2015), emphasizing interdependencies, the need to be responsive and specific, and based on benevolence however of a kind that is not selfless. There is the unavoidable question of exploitation, a condition perhaps shared between humans and animals (Porcher 2011), or whether the animals can be conceived as performing labour even in a collaborative vein (Porcher 2017). There are questions of the extent to which the relation involves attunement by farmers and their animals, resulting in synchronicity of movement and embodiment of knowing each other (Despret and Meuret 2016).

It remains open what are key concepts and relevant aspects, how to understand what is at stake in changing human-animal relations on farms. Is it about the position in the house/household (Tsing 2012) or village/community of the animals? Does it derive from the personal relations possible in small scale farming operations, the naming of individual animals (Fudge n.d.) and knowing their idiosyncratic characters? Or is it about the embodied relations and the materiality of the care and the landscape that structures these relationships, the seasonality of the relation, the collective experience of the butchering, and the bickering over how to butcher well, the preparing and the eating as a communal practice. Does this include how animal lives are part of particular village or regional metabolisms, based on a socioecological logic of exchange and sharing, while gathering together extended families or communities at particular moments in the year? (Ibanez & Mol, forthcoming).

This premodern ideal, of farming animals in ways that make ecological sense, does not massively pollute water, soil, contribute to climate change, and is somehow meaningful part of landscapes seems far removed from current industrial farming.

In a world of rich countries where meat consumption is expected to decrease for health reasons and also to reduce the impact of global warming on the environment, a more widespread presence of animals on the territory and closer to citizens and consumers may not create conditions of pollution, but it could be to protect the territory, maintain soil fertility with the use of manure and also with the agricultural production of fodder that allows crop rotation.

The anthrozoological and bioethical attention of human beings who are consumers of products of animal origin that catch the link between solar radiation collected from grasses growing on fertile soil without pollution and eaten by animals that perceive only – or in the main - positive sensations during their life should not be seen as much more ecological than any vegan choice?

5 – Coda

Clemens presses Pasqualino one more time for an account of what it is like to live with animals. Eager to evocatively describe the meaning of farmer-animal relations that seem about to disappear.

Pasqualino sighs: You want me to do anthropology. I will not. I want to do bioethics. I believe that farmer are – or should be - an integral part of society and that there is no specific peasant culture. Farmers are not aliens, but normal citizens. The difference is their work, they know something that consumers don't know. There is no attention to the real conditions for producing food, but mainly prejudice. Alright, if you want lived experience, if you want to know what it's like to live on a small farm and care for animals – amidst all the ambiguities and difficulties and dilemmas and impossibilities. Here, perhaps the best way is a work of fiction: 'Bloody Milk' ('Petit paysan'). A film about a small farmer caught up in an extreme situation, that exemplifies the everyday minor challenges that add up. Here's what Pasqualino wrote about the film:

To live in close contact with animals, there is nothing better than being a dairy cow farmer. The day is marked by a series of human and animal needs that absorb and bind for all 24 hours. The drama, or rather the contemporary dramas of this film, if caught, would help to recover the distance between the ways of being men in the city and in the countryside and understand the difficulties that the latter endured more or less from the beginning of the Neolithic. In the film, a young man loses much more than his job, and the means to exercise it. He loses the possibility of remaining loyal to his animals, and in order to defend his cows, which depend on him in all respects, he ends up breaking rules which, in addition to being laws, are also common sense rules that prevent the spread of illnesses. There are no completely guilty or innocent behaviors, the drama is simply inevitable and it is important to be able to watch it at least as an audience in the cinema.

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