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Food Animals

More Than a “Walking Larder”?

As the public became aware of the horrific suffering of calves sent overseas to be incarcerated in veal crates, campaigns sprung up around the country. . . . But it was at Coventry airport that committed animal rights campaigner, Jill Phipps, died as she tried to stop a lorry carrying calves from entering the airport. Jill ran in front of the truck expecting it to stop but the convoy kept moving and she was crushed beneath the wheels, dying instantly. (Animal Aid 2006, 3)

During the mid-1990s, people in southern and southeastern England took to the streets to protest against the export of live animals through their towns. At the peak of the protests, more than 2,000 people congregated every night in the Essex port of Brightlingsea to impede trucks taking veal calves to Europe (Brown 2006, 1). The antics of protesters and police attracted extensive local, national, and international media coverage, making this one of the United Kingdom’s highest profile animal-related campaigns in recent years. That many campaigners (such as pensioners and mothers with young children) had never protested before challenged the media stereotype of the typical animal-rights campaigner. Slogans such as “You don’t have to stop eating meat to care—ban live exports” and “On the hook not the hoof” indicate that the campaign was not overtly framed as a vegetarian issue and may partly explain the broad spectrum of public support this issue successfully mobilized. One resident observed, “There is no escape from the daily convoys with the sight, sound and smell of the animals” (McLeod 1998, 46).¹ Farm animals became an urban spectacle, and the trade itself, along with related animal-productive contexts and practices, became subjected to increasing public scrutiny.

These protests sparked my academic interest in human–livestock relations. In the summer of 1995, I was doing research for my undergraduate dissertation in sociology and was especially interested in protest groups

and how they were organized. The campaign to ban live exports seemed an obvious and appropriate comparative site for my project. I traveled to Brightlingsea to establish contacts, and spend time, with those involved in the protests at that time. Having negotiated access, I became curious about why women were so prevalent in this campaign and in issues pertaining to animal rights. Such questions were to be the focus of my doctoral thesis. However, it subsequently dawned on me that many campaigners had no pre-existing relationship to the animals on whose behalf they protested. I then began to wonder how agricultural workers who do have direct contact with livestock make sense of their interactions with them. This insight signaled a change in research focus that ultimately took me from protest to production (Wilkie 2006, 3).

This book opens up an under-explored and little understood aspect of contemporary life: men's and women's relationships with farm animals. Many people have firsthand experience with companion animals such as dogs and cats, but few have encountered animals reared and killed for food. In 1900, more than "half the population made a living producing food, [but] this has dramatically changed. Today barely 1.7 percent of the population works in production agriculture, with perhaps half of that group or less in animal agriculture" (Rollin 2004, 7). As consumers, we no longer need to produce the food we eat because others are paid to do it for us. Instead, we go to supermarkets and shops to buy a wide range of animal-derived foodstuffs, such as milk, eggs, cheese, and meat. As the link between production and consumption, and between producers and consumers, lessens, food animals, and those who work with them, have increasingly slipped from public view and consciousness. The more divorced we are from animal-productive processes, the easier it becomes to dissociate the animals we eat from the meat on our plates. As Carol Adams (2000, 14) notes, "Behind every meal of meat is an absence: the death of the animal whose place the meat takes. The 'absent referent' is that which separates the meat eater from the animal and the animal from the end product."

This book is not about the rights and wrongs of rearing, killing, and eating food animals. Such ethical debates are profoundly important, but related discussions have tended to be framed in fairly abstract terms that fail to take adequate account of people's hands-on experiences of working with livestock. What has been missing from the wider picture is a more nuanced appreciation of how those who breed, rear, show, fatten, market, medically treat, and slaughter livestock perceive and make sense of their interactions with the animals that constitute the center of their everyday working lives. Gaining insight into the nature of commercial and hobby human-livestock relations from the perspectives of small-, medium-, and large-scale producers,

auctioneers, livestock auction workers, vets, and slaughterers is a noteworthy piece of the jigsaw puzzle, a piece that needs far more scholarly attention. This book begins to explore this interspecies blind spot from a sociologically informed perspective. I suggest that one way to understand the various attitudes, feelings, and behaviors of those who work with livestock (in this case, mainly cattle, and to a lesser extent, sheep) is to consider the location of both people and animals in the commercial and non-commercial productive division of labor—that is, from birth to slaughter. Commercial and hobby contexts give agricultural workers (mainly male) and hobby farmers (mainly female) varying opportunities to interact with, and disengage from, the different species and breeds of livestock with which they work. This provides a more nuanced insight into the multifaceted, gendered, and contradictory nature of human–animal productive roles in modern industrialized societies. Livestock animals are not all the same. Neither are the people who work with them; nor are the productive contexts in which humans and animals work.

Exploring how different groups of agricultural workers think, feel, and relate to food animals also provides an additional perspective on people's dealings with domesticated animals. For example, domesticated animals are usually categorized as either livestock or pets. However, this clear-cut dichotomy is messier in practice because many of my contacts perceived some of the livestock they worked with as pets, friends, or even work colleagues. This highlights three interesting points: Livestock can be more than just “walking larders” (Clutton-Brock 1989); the animals' status as commodities is unstable; and instrumental and socio-affective attitudes can and do coexist, albeit to varying degrees, in these different productive settings. Underestimating the range of roles people can ascribe to livestock misrepresents and oversimplifies the potentially complex and dynamic nature of human–livestock interactions. These findings begin to challenge commonly held assumptions that productive animals are nothing more than mere commodities and that agricultural workers are typically uncaring toward such animals. Unlike hobby farming, commercial systems of animal production do depend to a great extent on instrumental attitudes of those working in this sector. But such attitudes can be disrupted and temporarily suspended when some animals come to be seen as individuated beings. I suggest that much can be gained from exploring the multifaceted and ambiguous nature of people's practical relations with livestock because it provides an opportunity to shed additional light on, and offer fresh insights into, longstanding dilemmas and ethical debates about the production and slaughter of food animals in modern industrialized societies.

For instance, the way food is produced in America is generating much

unease among consumers (e.g., Pollan 2006). The production of livestock is no exception, especially that of animals that have been intensively produced in confined animal-feeding operations (CAFOs).² According to a report by the Union of Concerned Scientists, “CAFOs are distinguished from other ways of raising livestock by their size, high-density confinement of livestock, and grain-based diet, which requires bringing feed to the animals rather than allowing animals to graze or otherwise seek their food” (Gurian-Sherman 2008, 13). Over a period of a few decades, CAFOs became the main method of production in the United States. Although they account for about 5 percent of all animal operations, they produce more than 50 percent of all food animals. One of the key issues the report highlights is the “hidden costs” that have been factored out, or “externalized,” to society, which understate the real costs associated with this type and scale of animal production (Gurian-Sherman 2008, 3–5). Such costs can take many forms: taxpayers footing the bill for feed grain subsidies; streams and rural water supplies being contaminated with animal manure; respiratory ailments being triggered by airborne ammonia mixing with other sources of air pollutants; and antibiotic-resistant pathogens such as methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) being created by excessive use of antibiotics.³ In addition, consumers deliberate the welfare and conditions of intensively produced farm animals and discuss “what constitutes a decent life for animals and what kind of life we owe the animals in our care” (Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production 2008, 13).

The wide-ranging fallout from CAFOs has been a catalyst for present-day debates about how livestock are produced in America. In the United Kingdom, it was the emergence of “Mad Cow Disease,” or bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), that focused the public’s attention on how food animals were raised and disposed. First identified in Britain in 1986, BSE reached epidemic proportions by the mid-1990s. “By 2000 it had killed over 200,000 cattle and caused the slaughter of almost four million exposed animals” (Kahrs 2004, 60).⁴ Scientists investigating this new cattle disease discovered that the brains of infected cattle showed neuropathological changes comparable to those in sheep with scrapie, a long-known spongiform encephalopathy (Smith and Bradley 2003, 188). Three of the main clinical signs of the disease were “nervousness, heightened reactivity to external stimuli, and difficult movement, particularly of the hind limbs” (Pattison 1998, 390). Once BSE manifests in cattle, the course of the disease can vary. Even so, as the disease progresses, it gets worse; it is incurable, and thus infected animals are slaughtered (Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs 2007a, 3). Researchers think the BSE agent could be “a self-replicating protein, referred to as a prion” (World Health Organization 2002, 1),⁵ and the most likely

mechanism for spreading the disease is meat-and-bone meal (MBM), a high-protein supplement feed made by rendering inedible bodily waste materials of different species of livestock (Smith and Bradley 2003, 186).⁶

During the 1970s and 1980s, fallen stock (animals that died on the farm) was rendered as animal feed. As no evidence at that time indicated that scrapie could be transmitted to other species of food animal, sheep carcasses infected with scrapie became part of MBM, and for the first time, cattle were exposed to bodies of ruminants.⁷ The temperatures during the rendering process were set below those recommended in European guidelines, and this may have contributed to the “survival of the scrapie agent (or a mutation thereof) in feed and its dissemination among cattle” (Kahrs 2004, 60). Researchers surmised that once the BSE agent entered the rendering process, it was transmitted to other cattle when they ingested infected MBM. The infected waste tissues of slaughtered bovines would in turn be added to the rendering process, which facilitated the ongoing spread of the disease via MBM. This animal-feed death loop led to a ban on ruminant feed in 1988. However, the ban was limited to ruminant species; proteins derived from rendered sheep or cattle could still be fed to non-ruminant species such as pigs and poultry.⁸

In 1996, eight years after the ban, the first case of new variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease was identified in Britain.⁹ The appearance of this incapacitating brain disease in a human being indicated that BSE could be transmitted from animals to people. The U.K. government responded by imposing a complete ban “on feeding mammalian protein to any farmed animals.” All other European Union (EU) countries followed suit with a similar ban in 2001 (Smith and Bradley 2003, 189–191). Because this was a new disease, experts and officials were not sure how best to manage the unfolding crisis, which led to contradictory messages being passed on to the public. Consumers responded by drastically reducing their intake of meat to the extent that sales plummeted by about 40 percent. There was also a worldwide ban on the exporting of all live cattle and cattle-derived products from the United Kingdom to other countries (Franklin 1999, 169). To further minimize the threat to human health, the U.K. government decided that all cattle over thirty months old could no longer enter the food chain.¹⁰ According to Sir John Pattison (1998, 392), “This added an extra margin of safety because cattle can be reasonably accurately aged by their dentition at 30 months and because BSE is relatively rare under the age of 30 months.” This strategy required such animals to be incinerated after slaughter; in effect, their entire bodies were treated as specified risk material (SRM). In some ways, this was an extension of an existing intervention to safeguard consumers from cattle organs most likely to be infected by BSE: the brain, spinal cord, tonsils, thymus, spleen, and intestines. In 1989, the United Kingdom introduced a specified ban on bovine offal.¹¹ In

practice, this meant that high-risk bodily organs, believed to account for “99% of the infectivity in a BSE-infected bovine,” had to be stained blue in abattoirs to signify its SRM status (Smith and Bradley 2003, 194).¹² In other words, such material was deemed unfit for human consumption.

BSE and other food-related scares, such as those involving *Salmonella*, *E. coli*, and foot-and-mouth disease, have prompted more and more consumers to question the safety of “food with a face” and its production (Williams 2004, 46). Many people were astonished and appalled to discover that cattle, herbivore animals, were being fed the bodies of reprocessed ruminants. This does not sit comfortably with idealized images of cows methodically grazing rich pastures on a sunny afternoon. An important consequence of these scares was that it brought livestock and related productive practices back into public consciousness: “They emphasized to the consumer, the connections between animals and meat, and underlined the processes of animal-into-meat” (Franklin 1999, 164). This theme of connecting and reconnecting is reflected in one of the main recommendations put forward in *Farming and Food: A Sustainable Future*, also known as the Curry Report: “The key objective of public policy should be to reconnect our food and farming industry: to reconnect farming with its market and the rest of the food chain; to reconnect the food chain and the countryside; and to reconnect consumers with what they eat and how it is produced” (Policy Commission on the Future of Farming and Food 2002, 6).

But reconnecting with the animate basis of our food can be far from straightforward, especially if it requires the death of healthy animals—which, of course, meat does. As I show in the chapters that follow, consumers and policymakers are not alone in this animal-productive-consumption dilemma. Many of those involved in producing, marketing, medically treating, and slaughtering livestock grapple with it, too.

Given this background, issues pertaining to the production, welfare, and slaughter of food animals have been ascending political and public agendas in Britain, as well as in the EU and in other industrialized countries. As I show in Chapter 6, such concerns have a long history. Even so, Ruth Harrison’s *Animal Machines* (1964) is one of the first seminal critiques of contemporary animal-production methods in the United Kingdom. In her opening pages, she observes with concern the emergence of the “factory farm”:

Farm animals are being taken off the fields and the old lichen covered barns are being replaced by gawky, industrial type buildings into which the animals are put, immobilised through density of stocking and often automatically fed and watered. Mechanical cleaning reduces still further the time the stockman has to spend with them, and the sense of unity with his stock which characterises

the traditional farmer is condemned as being uneconomic and sentimental. Life in the factory farm revolves entirely round profits, and animals are assessed purely for their ability to convert food into flesh, or “saleable products.” (Harrison 1964, 1)

As I discuss in Chapter 2, the shift from animal husbandry to animal industry breached the “social contract” thought to characterize traditional farmer–livestock relations (Rollin 1995). As a consequence, ethical and welfare dimensions of animal productive contexts that once were pretty much taken for granted have become subjected to increasing public, scientific, and political scrutiny. For example, critical appraisals of livestock farming, including high-profile animal-welfare campaigns, have tended to focus attention on the most intensively produced farm species: “veal crates for calves, stall and tether-cages for pregnant pigs, and battery cages for laying hens” (Druce and Lymbery 2006, 123; see also Singer 1995). As such groups often harness to good effect shocking exposé media coverage of such issues (Baker 1993), this has contributed to activating, mobilizing, and registering a broad range of public concerns about some of the more questionable practices occurring within the industry. At one end of this diverse spectrum are consumer groups and farm-animal-welfare organizations that lobby governments and producers to improve how livestock are treated in such settings. At the other end of the animal-welfare-rights continuum are those who are critical of simply tinkering with the existing system; by implication, this continues to endorse the use of animals for food and legitimates their legal status as property (Francione 2006). Advocates of a more absolutist standpoint believe it is irrelevant how humanely livestock are reared and slaughtered because it is morally unacceptable to kill them to put on your plate. By promoting meat-free diets, such as vegetarianism and veganism, proponents of this perspective challenge dominant ethical norms and species assumptions that underpin and reproduce the presupposed practice of killing and eating livestock (Nibert 2002; Regan 2004). However, “there is a significant chasm between the theory of animal rights and the social phenomenon that we call the ‘animal rights movement’” (Francione 1998, 45). Proponents of “new welfarism,” a fusion of these positions, believe that securing incremental changes that improve the welfare of animals in the interim are necessary steps toward realizing more radical animal rights goals in the long-term. Even though such advocates might still use the language of animal rights they seem to adopt a more pragmatic approach to bringing about more deep-seated changes.

Supporters of such groups have been the industry’s keenest observers and its most vociferous critics. Researchers note that many have little experience with the farm animals on whose behalf they protest (Webster 2005), are

more familiar with pets (Jamison and Lunch 1992), are predominantly female (e.g., Herzog et al. 1991; Shapiro 1994), and are from urban settings (Kendall et al. 2006; Serpell 2004). Research also has found that “consumers do not trust governments, the EU, or the food industry as sources of information on standards of animal welfare. They are much more willing to trust consumer and animal welfare organisations” (European Commission 2002, 18). Public skepticism has clearly contributed to opening up a critical space and influential platform for such non-official groupings. Their contribution to the public debate has been invaluable, and they have undoubtedly ensured that “the status of commodified domestic animals such as cattle, sheep, pigs and chickens, once excluded from spheres of moral concern and legal protections, is being re-evaluated” (Emel and Wolch 1998, 14).

However, animal advocates, and related organizations, also promote their critical perspectives and narratives of contemporary livestock production in publicly available reports, books, and articles. The increasing prevalence of such information “has created a ‘New Perception’ of animal agriculture by depicting commercial animal production as 1) detrimental to animal welfare, 2) controlled by corporate interests, 3) motivated by profit rather than by traditional animal care values, 4) causing increased world hunger, 5) producing unhealthy food, and 6) harming the environment” (Fraser 2001, 634).

Scholarly members of the academic community, such as scientists and ethicists, read these resources, too. However, if academics uncritically utilize or overly rely on advocacy literature in their analyses, they run the risk of perpetuating “misleading, polarized, or simplistic accounts of animal agriculture” (Fraser 2001, 634). As David Fraser notes, the New Perception has brought to the fore some searching questions about the nature of modern-day methods of livestock production, but the quality of the debate so far has been hampered by partisan positions that undermine a more sophisticated and nuanced discourse on such issues. Similarly, animal scientists conducting research for users within the agricultural sector have tended to produce research that more readily addresses the interests of those within the industry as opposed to those outside it.

Furthermore, one-dimensional accounts are more likely to depict intensive methods of production as being bad and workers in such systems as a relatively uncaring homogenous cohort who treats all species of livestock as an undifferentiated commodity that is exploited for profit. If this is the case, it implies that “the commercialization and industrialization of the livestock industry has created a class of animal producers wholly insensitive to animal needs” (Thompson 2004, 149). However, some researchers note that small family-owned farms are less harmful to their animals compared with large-scale producers (DeGrazia 2003, 182). Although the scale of industrialized

production would intensify any negative effects on a greater number of animals, it is possible that some intensive units may adhere more stringently to animal-welfare legislation than some family-run farms. Like any other well-managed organization, such operations would be more likely to encourage staff to comply with legal requirements and industry best practices and discourage corner-cutting practices. Similarly, small- to medium-scale producers may be more positively perceived because traditional farmers are believed to practice a higher level of animal-husbandry skills than their more hyper-commercial counterparts, but this cannot always be assumed. Drawing such clear-cut distinctions between factory farms and family farms also seems less straightforward in practice. Globally, only a minority of CAFOs are corporately owned. By and large, “Owner-operators of CAFOs farm under contract to firms that integrate the various links of the food chain” (Thompson 2004, 149). These firms tend to assign contracts to family-owned and family-run farms. In contrast, “Integrators generally own a fairly small component of the total chain, and it tends to be the slaughtering and processing facility, not the ‘factory farm’” (Thompson 2004, 149). Thus, it seems that many factory farms are likely to be operated and overseen by owners of family farms.

Livestock-production systems vary widely, too, especially with respect to the extent to which animals are intensively produced. Some species of livestock are biologically better suited to intensive production than others. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization, “The major expansion in industrial systems has been in the production of pigs and poultry since they have short reproductive cycles and are more efficient than ruminants in converting feed concentrates (cereals) into meat” (Bruinsma 2003, 166). Danielle Nierenberg (2005, 11–12) notes that industrial approaches account for “74 percent of the world’s poultry products, 50 percent of all pork, 43 percent of beef, and 68 percent of eggs.” The more intensively farmed species (i.e., poultry, pigs, veal calves, and dairy animals) also have the highest public profile. Sheep and beef cattle tend to attract less forthright public condemnation; perhaps the production of these species conjures up “a more natural image of animals in fields eating grass” (Webster, 1994, 128). For instance, in the United Kingdom, spring-born calves in suckler beef systems will suck milk from their mothers (or dams) while out to pasture over the summer.¹³ These calves are usually weaned from their mothers at six to ten months old and housed inside during the winter. The young animals are then finished off, or fattened up for slaughter, on grass over the coming summer months.¹⁴ Perhaps the public perceives animal systems with an extensive component in a more positive light—that is, as more natural and animal welfare-friendly. However, extensive systems can be problematic, too. For example, research into extensive beef cattle systems in northern Australia has found that cli-

matic conditions can disrupt animal welfare “through thermal stress and food shortages” (Petherick 2005, 212). In addition, free-range cattle are minimally handled and widely dispersed, conditions that hinder producers from identifying and treating animals that are unwell. Even low-input, extensive productive systems that impose minimal restrictions to the animal’s “natural” functioning can throw up animal welfare-related concerns (see Rollin 2004).

At the other end of the production process is the highly intensive and much criticized feedlot approach to finishing cattle in the United States. The High Plains (or “Beef Belt”) epitomizes the hothouse of beef-cattle production in regions such as southwestern Kansas, Texas, and Oklahoma. Some of the large operations in Kansas have the capacity to feed and finish up to 112,000 head of cattle for slaughter (Harrington and Lu 2002, 275). The bulk of feedlots are to be found in states with abundant grain supplies (Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service 2007, 76), and according to statistics from the Food and Agriculture Organization, 70 percent of all corn harvested in America is used to feed livestock because such grains promote rapid weight gain (Nierenberg 2005, 23). For example, “Beef calves can grow from 36 kilograms to 544 kilograms in just 14 months on a diet of corn, soybeans, antibiotics, and hormones” (Nierenberg 2005, 23). But such highly concentrated finishing regimes can induce a range of well-recognized animal-related problems—for example, digestive ailments, including liver abscesses, laminitis (i.e., inflammation of the hooves that can cause acute or chronic lameness), heat-induced stress from prolonged exposure to intense sunlight, and behavioral abnormalities such as tongue rolling, bar sucking, and aggression (Webster 2005).

As mentioned, the production of livestock generates much concern about, and puts pressure on, key environmental resources: “Livestock have a substantial impact on the world’s water, land and biodiversity resources and contribute significantly to climate change” (Food and Agriculture Organization 2006, 4; see also Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production 2008). Researchers have also estimated that this sector is accountable for 18 percent of anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions (Food and Agriculture Organization 2006, 112). On top of this, the “global production of meat is projected to more than double from 229 million tonnes in 1999/01 to 465 million tonnes in 2050, and that of milk to grow from 580 to 1043 million tonnes” (Food and Agriculture Organization 2006, xx). Growing demand for food-animal products is being driven by a number of factors. First, the current world population of 6.5 billion is anticipated to increase to 9.1 billion by the year 2050 and could reach 9.5 billion by 2070 (Food and Agriculture Organization 2006, 7). Second, as countries such as China become richer and

more urban, they develop an affluent stratum of people who have money to spend on a wide range of consumer items, including meat and dairy products.¹⁵ Third, the preference for animal-derived produce is characteristic of a dietary trend called “nutrition transition”: As people in transitional countries become wealthier, they eat fewer locally available grains, roots, vegetables, and fruit and consume “more pre-processed food, more foods of animal origin, more added sugar and fat, and often more alcohol” (Food and Agriculture Organization 2006, 10). The increased global demand for food-animal products has produced a “Livestock Revolution” and is forecast to “stretch the capacity of existing production and distribution systems and exacerbate environmental and public health problems” (Delgado et al. 1999, 1).

This brief overview indicates that, in Western agricultural contexts such as Europe, Australia, and the United States, there is a continuum of highly industrialized to less industrialized to non-industrialized livestock-production approaches along which small- to medium-scale farming units can coexist—admittedly rather precariously at times—alongside larger and more intensive producers. Each farm-animal species can also be produced to varying degrees of intensiveness and extensiveness depending on which management system is adopted. John Webster (2005, 98–99) suggests that each type of productive context has different strengths and weaknesses in terms of how each system might affect the well-being of the animals produced therein.¹⁶ Such an analysis encourages a more even-handed appraisal and reminds us that even seemingly natural methods can be problematic, too. It also mitigates the possibility of perpetuating a somewhat one-dimensional understanding of animal-production methods summed up as “intensive bad, extensive good” (Webster 2005, 98–99).

Equally, one-dimensional depictions of farmers, and other livestock-related personnel, fail to take adequate account of a range of individual (e.g., age, gender, and experience in handling livestock) and institutional factors (e.g., commercial or hobby production, position in the division of labor, scale of animal production) that could influence the different types of attitudes, feelings, and behaviors they might have toward the different species of animals with which they work. As I show over the course of this book, different stages of the production process provide a range of opportunities and constraints on the extent to which animal handlers actively engage with, or dissociate from, the animals they manage. As David Fraser (2001, 638) notes, there has been a tendency “to treat animal agriculture as an aggregate and draw conclusions that are unwarranted because they are unduly general.” Given that most of us have little, if any, experience in livestock farming, we are reliant on second-hand sources for our information. Currently, a lot of this information seems

to come from animal-welfare and animal-rights organizations that tend to focus on and critique factory-farming approaches. Although such contributions have been very significant, they do not represent all of the productive contexts in which different species of animals are produced or the full range of human–livestock relations that might occur within these settings. We need to be alert to the possibility that our contemporary understanding of food–animal-productive contexts is being perceived primarily through a factory-farming lens.

The largely critical nature of this coverage has left many industry workers feeling rather defensive and circumspect in their dealings with outsiders. At the same time that members of the general public and official bodies must be made aware of the darker sides of animal production, including bad practice, agricultural workers in general must not be routinely cast as villains. Coverage of the industry gives little attention to examples of proficient animal handling and fails to report that many workers carry out their duties competently and others go beyond this by practicing “good stockmanship” (discussed in the next chapter). Perhaps the industry has responded to unfavorable exposure by promoting a rather oversimplified and more positive image of animal production than is justified by actual conditions (Fraser 2001). For instance, the use of talking animals in industry advertisements, such as the California Milk Advisory Board’s “Happy Cows” campaign, might be an effective way to promote sales of cheese, and of engaging its target audience’s attention, but this medium has generated much criticism, too, because it does not accurately represent the reality of the productive contexts in which animals are farmed (Glenn 2004).¹⁷ The livestock sector is not oblivious to or unaffected by wider changes in society or shifting moral expectations of its customer base. By conforming to industry ideals and legal regulation, it treats livestock in a manner that promotes their welfare and minimizes unnecessary suffering; this standard not only enhances animal productivity but also boosts financial returns and improves the public image of the industry (e.g., English et al. 1992; Hemsworth and Coleman 1998).¹⁸ The industry wants the best of both worlds. But, of course, industry opponents argue that any degree of “unnecessary suffering” is unjustifiable because “all of our animal use can be justified *only* by habit, convention, amusement, convenience, or pleasure. . . . Most of the suffering that we impose on animals is completely unnecessary” (Francione 2006, 79). What this clearly shows is just how polarized and contested contemporary food–animal production has become.¹⁹

In all, it would seem that our current knowledge of human–food animal relations is somewhat partial and partisan. As we have reached something of an impasse, this is perhaps an opportune time to take stock of people’s relationships with livestock. What has been missing from the debate is an appre-

ciation of how those involved in the daily tasks of producing and slaughtering make sense of their interactions with and experiences of the animals they work with as part of their everyday lives. This in essence was the purpose of my research and leads me to the nature of my study. Here, I should note that most of the commercial producers in my study worked with beef cattle. Others, such as auctioneers, mart workers, and veterinarians, worked with different species of livestock, especially cattle and sheep and, to a lesser extent, pigs. The reason for this difference is that I gained access to the commercial sector via one of the most modern and largest livestock auction markets in Europe. Since intensively produced pigs and poultry tend to bypass the live auction market, I mostly came into contact with people who worked with ruminant species.²⁰ However, my contacts in hobby farming were more likely to work with sheep, goats, pigs, poultry, and rabbits. My research therefore provides insight into animal-productive contexts that are less associated with high-profile factory-farmed species (such as pigs, poultry, dairy, and veal calves) and methods.

I conducted most of my research in northeastern Scotland, which has a worldwide and long-standing reputation for the production of beef cattle (especially Aberdeen Angus) and is thus a pertinent site for such research (e.g., Carter 1979; M'Combie 1875; Perren 1978; Trow-Smith 1959). I chose an ethnographic approach characterized by "the ethnographer participating overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions—in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research" (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995, 1). From August 1998 to August 1999, I combined a four-month period of overt participation observation with forty-six in-depth but fairly unstructured interviews with fifty-three people.²¹ At that time, the commercial sector was still coming to terms with the fallout and bureaucratic implications of the BSE crisis, and the strength of the pound and poor weather conditions contributed to financial difficulties within the industry (Slee 1998). I was therefore acutely aware that a predominantly, but not exclusively, male-dominated workforce whose livelihood was under threat might be reticent toward a female researcher who was a relative outsider. Although I was born into a farming family, we moved to the city during my early primary-school years. People in the field frequently asked whether I came from a farming background; having a father who farmed in the area and a few extended members of the family who still do so helped my respondents locate me in their world. My ability to speak and understand Doric, the local rural dialect, reinforced my local country roots. However, as I noted in my field notes, "My identity is confused in that I come from the country, still have a country accent, but have lived in the town for most of my life. My parents

have lived their lives in the country—I feel a connection with these people yet there are times I feel so distant. . . . I have all the right credentials but I have little lived experience of living and working in the country.”

In some ways, I was an honorary member of the farming community through birth and family connections, but such membership was in one respect misleading. It was assumed that I ate meat. In my late teens I started to remove meat from my diet, and I have become increasingly vegetarian. In later years, I adopted a vegan diet. As Nick Fiddes (1991, 111) suggests, “True vegans aim totally to avoid all animal produce—including dairy products, wool, leather, even honey, and sometimes extending to such items as batteries or beer which are reputed to use animal products in manufacture.” Based on this definition I am vegan by diet only, not by lifestyle. If people enquired during my fieldwork whether I was vegetarian, I agreed to this label for the following reason: I am not strictly vegan, but vegans by virtue of their diet are vegetarian. I was the embodiment of ambiguity: I passed as “one of them,” but at the same time I was seen by some in this context as being “one of them.” However, as Geoffrey Pearson (1993, xviii) suggests, “The ethnographer does not have to be a competent burglar, or prostitute, or policeman, or miner in order to deliver competent ethnographies of work, life, and crime. . . . It is an old adage of social research that you do not need to be Caesar in order to understand Caesar; indeed, it might even be a handicap.”

Given all this, I thought it prudent to carry out a period of fieldwork to increase my general understanding and knowledge of the livestock-production process. As the livestock auction is the public face of the industry, and its social hub, it was an obvious entry point into the sector. Having gained permission from management to conduct my research in this setting, I worried that my presence might raise suspicions about my purpose among members of the workforce (May 2001, 157). Indeed, management’s concerns for my safety and restriction of my research role in the mart to a primarily observational one probably gave workers further reason to be wary of me early in my fieldwork. The mart has the capacity to process 3,000 cattle and 14,000 sheep. Given the unpredictable nature of working with livestock, especially cattle, management permitted me to spend time with mart workers backstage in the market as long as I remained vigilant when the animals were being moved. I soon identified the safest observational points and quickly realized when I was standing in the wrong place. During the early stages of my fieldwork, many workers seemed to assume I was monitoring animal welfare and was thus a tool of management. Over time, mart workers more readily acknowledged me to the point at which I was able to engage them in impromptu conversations, which helped to dispel their suspicions. Such workers are relatively unaccustomed to having a student spending protracted periods of time in their

work domain and expressing an interest in their work. Handling livestock is perceived as a low-status job, so why would anyone from an academic background want to hang around in a cold, smelly, noisy, and potentially dangerous setting?

Having become familiarized with and better informed about the various roles of those involved in handling livestock from birth to slaughter, I was ready to carry out my interviews. I talked to farmers and stockmen, people working at the mart, hobby farmers, veterinary staff, and a few abattoir workers.²² Field contacts and interviewees also recommended additional people I could interview. This snowball technique is useful, but it bypasses people who are not connected with my contacts' specific social networks. If my contacts limited their recommendations to people they thought would be most open to being involved in the study, my findings might be skewed to those who could be described as "good stockmen" or "good farmers." As there has been so little sociological research into human–livestock relations in commercial and hobby contexts, even firsthand accounts from good stockmen offer a useful insight into this neglected area. My approach to interviewing was fairly flexible, as I wanted the opportunity to explore any relevant issues raised by my contacts during the interview. Moreover, interviewing people from diverse working contexts required the flexibility to ask questions that were appropriate to each of their particular work environments. Notwithstanding, I tried to explore some core themes with all interviewees: personal background, experience working with livestock, stages associated with producing livestock, how they made sense of their interactions with the animals they worked with, and the slaughter of livestock (see Wilkie 2002). The interviews, which lasted between forty-five minutes and three hours, were audiotaped and transcribed. I analyzed data in an ongoing iterative process as I carried out my fieldwork and interviews. Thus, I adopted a grounded analysis that enabled me to explore, cross-reference, and test the accuracy of my observations and emerging ideas with research contacts and interviewees.

Supplementing our existing knowledge of human–livestock interactions with emerging empirical findings, from those located within the commercial livestock sector and from those marginal to it, will help to broaden and deepen our current understanding of this rather neglected interspecies connection (see e.g., Lovenheim 2002; Tovey 2003). In the first half of the book, I trace the rise of this ancient relationship by outlining some of the main perspectives and debates surrounding the process of animal domestication. This leads to a historical overview of some of the key socioeconomic and technical factors that contributed to the industrialization of cattle production and slaughter in the United States and Europe and the subsequent commercialization of human–livestock relations. I then explore the gendered nature of food-animal

production and women's roles in livestock farming. The livestock auction market is not only the public and male face of the commercial sector; it is also where livestock are marketed and economically valued. I trace the rise of the modern auction system, and auctioneering, in Britain and some of the factors that go into discovering the price of livestock at different stages of the production process. The second half of the book explores the ambiguous status of livestock and how those at the "byre face" negotiate the extent to which they actively form emotional ties to or disconnect from the breeding, store and prime animals they work with.²³ This leads to a detailed discussion of how healthy and ill livestock become deadstock and illustrates how agricultural workers, hobby farmers, and slaughterers make sense of and manage this pivotal transitional stage.