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The Dairy Industry and the Labor of Reproduction
California's Most Unhappy Cows

by JASON HRIBAL

When I moved to Livermore, California in 1989, the town had changed considerably from the one I had visited only ten years previous. As a young child, I went to a large cow pasture located near the middle of town to buy freshly-made ice cream. Now, in its place, was a large shopping mall. Where I remembered grass fields with horses and cows, there was now gas stations, convenience stores, and large expensive homes. By the late 1990s, even the distant foot-hills had become covered with construction. Where Livermore was once well known for their cowboys, it had become, in a short matter of time, just another faceless commuter suburb. A similar future would occur in countless metropolitan areas. But a question remains: where have all of California's cows gone? Surely, they must be somewhere, for the state is the nation's leading dairy producer with $4.6 billion in yearly revenue. The answer is a most unpleasant one.

Dry-lot dairying began in the 1950s and 1960s. The reason for its invention was simple: far cheaper to build and operate, greater numbers of cows, more efficient production process, and much higher profit margins. First springing up on the outskirts of large cities – Los Angeles, Phoenix, Honolulu, Tokyo, Madras, Baghdad – , it is called dry-lot because there is no barn, stalls, or pasture. Rather this industry operates in the open with fenced fields of concrete and bare earth. There may, or may not, be shade or wind protection installed during certain months of the year. The average size of an urban lot is between 5 to 15 acres. In more rural areas, though, they grow up to 800 acres. The average number of cows per lot ranges between 500 to 6000.

On these dry-lots, the production is both extensive and intense. Operations are gigantic. Costs are stripped to a bare minimum. Division of labor is high: with (re)producers, milkers, feeders, suppliers, cleaners, manure collectors, brokers, truckers, and veterinarians. The tasks are purposely repetitive. The pace is rapid. Efficiency standards are rigorous. There are daily quotas and weekly performance testing, which are normally outsourced to specialized companies. Working conditions are dismal, unhealthy, and dangerous. Lactation is the primary goal, and it is accomplished through reproduction. The cow is the prime source of labor. Her schedule is 350 days on and 40-50 off. Milking occurs 2 to 3 times per day. The process itself runs on an assembly-line, each session

taking as little as 13 minutes. Therein, thousands of gallons of milk are generated on a daily basis. This is lean and mean production. In fact, the annual turnover rate for cows is 40% to 100%. There is nothing "primitive" about this form of accumulation. Rather it is quite laborious and profitable.

Privately, the dairy industry has always recognized and understood this. Whether in their academic textbooks, training manuals, or internal analyses, they consider the actions of the cow to be a form of work. Whether in their economic theory, management strategies, or operational practices, cows are thought of, described, and treated as unwaged employees and workers. Publicly, however, this labor has been devalued, dematerialized, and made invisible. It has been hidden under the guise of "natural." In general, the labor of reproduction of women, as Maria Mies argued in her classic Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale (1986), has met this same fate. As we are told repeatedly, only waged-work (and primarily that done by men) matters. This is a lie.

Anthroarchy, or rule by humankind, has been around far longer than the capitalist system. Yet, this rule has not existed from time immemorial. Nor has it ever been complete or omnipotent. Rather, this rule has been in a constant state of flux, changing throughout history according to social and economic factors. Equally, as much as this rule has been enforced, it has been contested by cows, pigs, horses, and even a few humans. Consider the rise of the modern commercial dairy.

Its history, as with that of capitalism, begins with the enclosure of the commons: a process that has been repeated on a global scale from the 16th century to the present day. Its birthplace was Western Europe. On the commons, dairying was controlled by women, and it was more of an art than a business or science. These women often possessed an independent status. Their work was largely seasonal. Their knowledge was passed down through the generations. Their tasks revolved around one or two cows. Once a day, the women extracted the surplus, i.e. milk, from the cow. They weaned the calf from her mother, in order to obtain greater surplus. The calf was either kept separate or, especially if male, traded. The women provided health-care for the cow. They provided bedding and fodder in the cold winter months, normally within the cottages themselves. They collected the manure, which was equally as essential to village life. Their primary goal was subsistence. But, if the selling of products did occur, they were in charge of it. As for the hours and pace, this had to be negotiated.

"The Irish cows," the 17th century traveler Fynes Moryson explained, "are so stubborn, as many times they will not be milked but by some one woman, when, how, and by whom they list." "Yea, when these cows thus madly deny their milk the women wash their hands in the cows' dung, and so gently stroke their dugs, yea, put their hands into the cow's tail, and with their mouths blow into their tails, that with this manner (as it were) of enchantment they may draw milk from them." "Yea, these cows seem as rebellious to their owners as the people are to their kings" Cows, Moryson came to recognize, had agency. They labored and produced. They resisted and fought. They negotiated with humans as to the actualities and limits of their own exploitation.

On the commons, the cow herself had a fair amount of autonomy. The phrase "when the cows come home" specifically described this situation. Cows were fenced out of, not into, particular areas. They had their own customary rights. The right of pasture, for example, allowed them to tread unmuzzled into the open, non-arable fields. Cows often came and went as they pleased. They socialized with other creatures. They chose their own sexual partners. When they were dry (not lactating), they could disappear into the fields, fens, woodlands, and mountains for weeks to months at a time. Some cows would live upwards of 20 years, before being culled. In fact, the phrase itself takes the form of a question-one in which the cows themselves provided the answer. When are the cows coming home? Or are they even coming home at all?

The process of enclosure, however, ended this manner of life. In the case of Ireland, it began with William Petty in 1691. Petty was an economist for the British crown, and it was his job to survey the empire's newest conquest. The land, natural resources, humans, and other animals were calculated into an exact monetary amount. Each was considered as to their future revenue-making potential. For the Irish cow, Petty weighed a series of questions: How much grass does each individual cow consume per year? How much milk does she produce in that given period of time? What is the bare minimum amount of acreage needed in order for her to survive and reproduce? A bull can impregnate how many cows each year? What is the maximum number of cows that one person can milk per day? This was the beginning of scientific management.

Step one of the process of enclosure was the imposition of private property and the closed-field. This was accomplished through war, parliamentary acts, planting of hedges, and the criminalization of customs and traditions. Step two was the putting-out system. Since grazing had to now be paid for and fodder purchased, subsistence gave way to exchange. Money was needed. The power of middle-men and merchants multiplied. Thus the cottagers had to extract and sell larger amounts of milk, often for diminishing returns. This also meant that little to no milk remained for the calf and human family. The manufacture of cheese and butter put an even greater strain on the village: as it takes 4 liters of milk to make 500 grams of cheese and 20 to 35 liters of milk to make 1 kilogram of butter. From the mid-17th to the mid-18th century, the quantity of these two products entering London more than doubled. Eventually, with increasing debt, hunger, and desperation, the cow was sold to the farmer. In turn, the woman cottager sold her labor to the farmer. Enclosure would accomplish its goals: the commons were destroyed and an industrial labor-force was created. Indeed, in the contemporary world, there are a manifold of non-profit organizations that, through public donations, purchase cows or pigs (as a form of cottage industry) for third world families. While self-congratulatory and optimistic in their vision, these groups' methodology is neither new, innovative, nor liberating. Rather, this is an old, tired, and ultimately destructive system. This is the restarting of capitalism.

The term "farm" originally meant to lease out something (like a plow or bull) for profit. During the 18th century, however, its meaning changed to a site of production. This was a place where labor could be concentrated, intensified, and factored. The farm was a factory. There were, on average, 20 to 40 cows per herd. Pastures were small and fenced.

Barns were divided into stalls. Shifts could last from 12 to 18 hours. There were supervisors and harsh discipline. Even knowledge itself became enclosed, as the woman's wisdom and skills were co-opted by the male farmer and veterinarian. Dairying became a science and business.

In the urban centers, the conditions were worse. During their dry season, the cows would be pastured on the outskirts of metropolitan areas. But, while lactating, they would be moved closer or into the city. Here, 400 to 700 cows would be housed together indoors for 6 to 7 months straight, feeding on brewers' grain. William Wilberforce himself co-owned a large dairy operation in London.

It was not long before the brewers and distillers themselves entered into the business. Utilizing their waste products (leftover slop) as feed, hundreds of cows would be crammed into rooms, shacks, or buildings. The frequent adjectives used at the time to describe the factory conditions ranged from airless and lightless to nightmarish and putrid. The mid-century New York City newspapers deemed the milk itself, "swill." There was no sanitation, no health-care, no ability to even move. By the mid-18th century, 18,000 cows worked in the dense interiors of NYC.

It was also during this century that the managerial focus shifted towards the source of labor-power itself: the body. The shape and size of the cow's head, eyes, neck, shoulders, ribs, rump, and udder were each quantified and standardized. Gaunt workers or those who refused to readily supply milk were no longer allowed to reproduce. Only large, plump cows, meeting the correct standards – which included a proper disposition – , were selected to breed. The breeding process itself became scientific, controlled, and manipulated. In fact, over this period, the shorthorn cow replaced the longhorn as the common dairy laborer. Daily, weekly, and monthly records were now kept on both a local and national level. Uniform reproduction and production quotas were set. Bulk feeding, with a diet consisting of linseed, cottonseed, oilseed cakes, brewer's waste, and pulped roots, became the rule. Dairyman associations were established. States opened public colleges, who focused on the study of agriculture and animal management. These institutions were, in fact, the first business schools.

Between 1850 and 1900, the number of cows employed in the United States tripled in number, from 5 to 17 million. The milking season was extended by two full months, from approximately 220 days to 310. Likewise, this same timeframe witnessed a doubling in individual output, from approximately 1,400 to 3,600 lbs per year.

Advancements in technology, whether rail, refrigeration, the centrifugal separator, or the automated milking machine, only served to intensify (re)production. Artificial insemination, for example, began in the early 20th century. Cows have a similar gestation period as to humans. And, not surprisingly, they have no interest in getting pregnant while still lactating. The dairy industry, however, had other ideas. Namely, they wanted to shorten the dry season even more, thereby accruing the total days of annual milking. Thus, since the cows refused to cooperate, the industry created an artificial means to achieve this goal. By the 1950s, such methods had been perfected.

Other advancements have included wide-spread application of anabolic steroids. Currently, rBGH is the preferred growth stimulator. Feed has become heavily supplemented with oral steroids and animal protein (surplus from the slaughter industries). Utilization of antibiotics has expanded rapidly, as working conditions continuously deteriorate, injury-rates multiply, and diseases evolve. Breeding criteria has grown ever more refined. Today, the Holstein comprises over 80% of U.S. and European Union cows. Performance testing has become more complex. In fact, "optimal dairy cow replacement" is presently the favored managerial strategy – regardless of the size of the operation. Based upon a statistical formula that measures individual (re)production rates, profits are maximized by employing a cow for only one or two lactation cycles. This is capitalism's never-ending drive to increase work, and it has succeeded.

Since 1950, individual U.S. herd sizes have grown 200% to 950%. In 1950, the average cow produced 5,300 lbs of milk per year. By 1972, this figure had grown to 10,271 lbs. Today, this number stands at 19,000-24,000 lbs! As for the future, the acceptance of cloning looks to be the ultimate goal of the industry. For the hardest worker of the lot could be remade again, again, and again.

The California Milk Advisory Board currently spends about $37 million per year on advertising for their "Happy Cow Campaign." Therein, pictures of happy, go-lucky cows on vast fields of rolling green pastures are shown to the general public. Yet, this image is far from the truth, not to mention highly ironic. For not only do 60% of California's 1.5 million cows work on high-density feed-lots (and this percentage climbs by the month), but this is the same group of people who publicly deny that cows have any emotions or intellect. Perhaps to clear up this confusion, we should examine the history of the word "anthropomorphism."

In the ancient world, anthropomorphism referred to attributing human traits or characteristics to a deity. The Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans all worshipped Gods/Goddesses who had different human/nonhuman forms. By the 4th century, the definition changed to ascribing human traits to anything irrational or impersonal. Christianity was just then becoming the dominate state religion of the Roman Empire. Thus forth, any sect that still held onto pagan beliefs was considered a direct threat to the authority and rule of the state. In order to justify the marginalization and destruction of these religions, to be anthropomorphic became a criminal act. The next shift in definition would not occur till the modern period – although its conception and purpose was quite similar.

Some readers are probably thinking that this shift happened in the 17th and 18th century with Descartes and his automata (that animals were unfeeling, unknowing machines). But this is not so. In truth, many people from these two centuries thought that Descartes was full of shit, and they were not afraid to say so publicly. Rather, the shift in definition actually dates from the 19th and 20th centuries, and it grew out of a struggle between industry, commerce, and science versus the rapidly strengthening animal-advocacy movement.

On the one side, there were organizations and individuals who depended upon the oppression and exploitation of other animals for their labor-force and profits. On the other, there were organizations and individuals who believed that animals should be treated fairly. Some believed that animals deserved social and political rights, maybe even liberation. Moreover, this movement's numbers and public influence was increasing by the year. Hence, the elite establishment had a serious problem on their hands, and they needed public-relation solutions.

Well, one of the solutions was to change the definition of anthropomorphism. It now became a sin whether biologically, socially, morally, or economically – to compare other animals to humans. So while there was no empiricism behind the word, the claim sounded good, and it made for effective propaganda. As it was in the ancient world, anthropomorphism is purely a political term. Similar to the application of "utopian" or "romantic," it is designed to smear and dismiss. Indeed, over the course of the 19th and 20th century, a once unsubstantiated and unempirical word has transformed into a scientific fact. Yet, in the past three decades, this perspective has been challenged. Many among the general public now openly and critically wonder about the emotions and intellects of our fellow animals – hence the dairy industry's use of such concerns as a means to sell more milk. But contrary to their campaign theme, no creature could ever be cheerful on a dry-lot. California's cows are most unhappy.

Jason Hribal is a historian and author of *Fear of the Animal Planet: the Hidden History of Animal Resistance* (CounterPunch /AK Press).