



Bovine biopolitics and the promise of monsters in the rewilding of Heck cattle



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ABSTRACT

In the early 1980s the Dutch ecologist Frans Vera began an ambitious ecological restoration experiment on a polder in the Netherlands. He introduced herds of 'back-bred' Heck cattle and other large herbivores and encouraged them to 'de-domesticate' themselves and 'rewild' the landscape they inhabit. His intervention has triggered a great deal of interest and controversy. It is being replicated and adapted across Europe as part of a wider interest in 'rewilding' in nature conservation. This innovative approach rubs up against powerful and prevalent practices of environmental management. This paper examines these frictions by mapping the character and exploring the interface between different modes of nonhuman biopolitics – in this case the powerful ways in which modern humans live with and govern cattle. Focusing on the story of Heck cattle and the bovine biopolitics of their rewilding it attends in particular to the character, place and promise of monsters. It first outlines a conceptual framework for examining nonhuman biopolitics and teratology (the study of monsters), identifying fertile tensions between the work of Haraway, Derrida and Deleuze. It then provides a typology of four prevalent modes of bovine biopolitics – namely agriculture, conservation, welfare and biosecurity – and their associated monsters. This paper identifies rewilding as a fifth mode and examines frictions at its interfaces with the other four. Developing the conceptual framework the paper examines what these frictions tell us about the understandings of life that circulate in the ontological politics of contemporary environmentalisms. In conclusion the paper critically examines the monstrous promise of rewilding, in relation to tensions between the convivial aspirations of Haraway and Deleuze.

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1. Introduction

In the early 1980s the Dutch ecologist Frans Vera began an ambitious ecological restoration experiment at Oostvaardersplassen, a state-owned polder just north of Amsterdam in the Netherlands. As the director for 'nature development' at Staatsbosbeheer – the Dutch statutory nature conservation authority – Vera introduced herds of 'back-bred' cattle and horses and encouraged them to 'rewild' themselves and the landscape they inhabit. 'De-domesticated' Heck cattle (Fig. 1) and other herbivores were released from dominant modes of human management and encouraged to graze open and dynamic 'park-like landscapes'. As a scientist Vera sought to challenge the dominant paradigm in paleoecology that understands the 'high forest' to be the climax ecosystem of Northern European wilderness (Vera, 2000). As an advocate he hoped to demonstrate a new and exciting model of wildlife conservation that emphasised processes and emergent properties. The experiment has generated a great deal of interest amongst conservationists and Heck cattle have subsequently proliferated across an

integrating Europe as one of a range of keystone species for experiments in rewilding.

This innovative approach to environmental management rubs up against the powerful and prevalent practices of agriculture, biosecurity, conservation and animal welfare. It has caused much debate and consternation amongst farmers, scientists and bureaucrats. This paper examines the frictions between different modes of nonhuman biopolitics – in this case the powerful ways in which modern humans live with and govern cattle.¹ Focusing on the story of Heck cattle and the bovine biopolitics of their rewilding it attends in particular to the character, place and promise of monsters. It first outlines a conceptual framework for exploring nonhuman biopolitics and teratology (the study of monsters), identifying fertile tensions between the work of Haraway, Derrida and Deleuze. It then provides a typology of four prevalent modes of bovine biopolitics – namely agriculture, conservation, welfare and biosecurity – and their associated monsters. This paper identifies rewilding as a fifth mode and

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¹ 'Cows' refers to female members of the species, bulls to the males. In this paper we use the group noun 'cattle', aware that this term generally relates to their productive use as a commodity – in contrast to 'bovine', which is a more general descriptor but encompasses other species.



Fig. 1. Heck cattle at OVP. Source: ICMO (2005).

examines frictions within this approach and at its interfaces with the other four. Developing the conceptual framework the paper reflects on what these frictions tell us about the understandings of life that circulate in the ontological politics of contemporary environmentalisms. In conclusion the paper critically examines the monstrous promise of rewilding, in relation to tensions between the convivial aspirations of Haraway and Deleuze. Rewilding increases the number of monstrous interfaces in human–cattle relations and there is no easy way of rendering these modes into one coherent way of relating to and caring for cows. The aim of this paper is not therefore one of resolving the emerging tensions, but exploring ways of learning to fruitfully appreciate the promise of monsters at the interfaces between conflicting modes of nonhuman biopolitics.

2. Biopolitics and teratology

In their introduction to an edited collection heralding the arrival of ‘new animal geographies’, Philo and Wilbert (2000) differentiate work concerned with ‘animal spaces’ and ‘bestly places’. The first examines the spaces allocated to the animal under various modes of human ordering. The second maps the places created by animals through their own specific agencies and interspecies relations. In the decade since this analysis was published there has been a rich revitalisation of human geography and the social sciences more generally, characterised by diverse interests in life and how it is governed (Braun, 2008; Lorimer, 2010a). Philo and Wilbert’s space/place distinction provides a useful heuristic for interpreting this biopolitical turn, which has expanded from a Foucauldian interest in the ways in which life is spaced, to a vital materialist concern for the lively potentials of nonhuman forms and processes to make places and unsettle such orders.

As we explain in more detail below, this shift from a biopolitics as a control over life to a biopolitics of living with, involves associated shifts in teratology. As a scientific field teratology refers to ‘the biological study of the development, anatomy or abnormalities of monsters’ (Angell, 2008: p. 132). In this paper we will refer to teratology as the study of abnormality and the ways in which it is defined, governed and rendered affective as monstrous. Here teratology is sensational; it is principally concerned with monsters and the ways in which certain forms, practices and processes are monstered. Amongst social scientists teratology is both a critical and an affirmative practice; mapping and querying prevalent and powerful regimes for normalisation and affirming the promissory potential of those these figure as abhorrent. Monster here is deployed as both a noun and a verb; it refers to both the abhorrent outsider and the processes by which these become such.

Contemporary concerns with biopolitics and monsters are indebted to Foucault, whose rich genealogies of power/knowledge configurations document the techniques through which life is clas-

sified, ordered and brought into being (Foucault, 1970). Much of Foucault’s work is dedicated to tracing the emergence of modern forms of governmentality through which human life – as individual bodies (anatopolitics) and wider populations (biopolitics) – is constructed as a viable concern for state power (Foucault, 1998). Foucault distinguishes between biopower and biopolitics; where the former relates the art of governance and control, the latter describes the production of new forms of life and ways of living. Foucault’s concern for the *control over life* is continued in the sociology of science, including work on the ‘politics of life itself’ (Rose, 2006) and the assemblages through which such control is achieved (Barry, 2001; Latour, 2005; Ong and Collier, 2005). Foucault’s biopolitics has also been extremely influential in work in animal studies that explores the techniques and consequences of different animal spacings (Franklin, 2007; Shukin, 2009).

Elden (2001) argues that Foucault’s biopolitics maintains a consistent interest in the construction of the outside, the anomaly or the abnormal (Foucault, 2003). Biopolitical regimes of normalisation and improvement require the identification of ‘privileged monsters’, which are defined through the identification of exceptions (Elden, 2001; Sharpe, 2007). For Agamben (2005) this biopolitics reached its horrific modern apotheosis in the eugenicist programmes of National Socialism that legitimated a ‘thanato-politics’; the killing of the abnormal in ‘spaces of exception’ to protect the health of the population or race. Derrida’s recent writings advocating for animals have sought to extend this analysis to monster the logics and practices associated with ‘making animals killable’ in industrial animal slaughter (Derrida and Mallet, 2008).

Although Foucault’s genealogies are largely dedicated to revealing the ‘constitution of the normal’ it is clear that he found hope in the figure of the abnormal and the potential of life to escape the regimes that render it visible and calculable (Foucault, 1998). This potential influenced and is more clearly developed by Donna Haraway, who presents figures that herald the promissory potential of the monstrous – including the trickster and (perhaps most famously) the cyborg (Haraway, 1991, 1997). Unlike the anti-metaphysical and largely human figures offered by Foucault these are lively, material entities suggestive of a critical, posthumanist politics. For Haraway, the promise of monsters emerges from their impure ontologies, which unsettle exclusive, modern dualisms and their associated animal spaces. Monsters create bestly spaces; queer and fecund sites for what she terms ‘a regenerative politics for inappropriate/d others’ (Haraway, 1992). This particular understanding of the monstrous has been hugely influential, particularly in queer theory (Giffney and Hird, 2008) and feminist science studies (Lykke and Braidotti, 1996) – including the emergent field of transbiology (Franklin, 2006).

Recently Haraway (2008) has engaged more systematically with the metaphysics of biopolitics – or what she terms the ‘ontological choreography’ (after Charis Thompson) of interspecies rela-

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