



## Modifying and commodifying farm animal welfare: The economisation of layer chickens



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### A B S T R A C T

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As the profile of farm animal welfare rises within food production chains, in response both to greater consumer ethical engagement with the lives of animals and to the market opportunities afforded to supply chain actors by this engagement, farm animal welfare (which we might define as the qualities of life of sentient beings) is increasingly being modified under the processes of 'economisation' (Caliskan and Callon, 2009) and marketisation (Caliskan and Callon, 2010) from a basic condition of legitimation and productivity to a calculable commodity in itself, subject to assessment, scoring and qualification. Over and above regulatory or assurance scheme compliance, welfare conditions and criteria are being used as a component or distinctive selling point for food products, brands or even particular manufacturers and retailers within 'value-added' marketing technologies. To make our argument we focus entirely on the case of industrialised free-range laying chicken production practices and the retailing practices that have developed to create a market for eggs produced under this farming method. We argue that economisation and marketisation processes have major implications for the meaning, assessment and communication of farm animal welfare and, consequently, for the way in which consumption practices become pre-defined. We maintain that recent developments and shifts in the economisation of animals through food chain actors' interpretations of consumer concern for 'good' welfare, coupled with advances in the reach of veterinary science, are leading to a co-shaping and co-modification – through an assemblage of procedures, technologies, performances and forms of assessments – of farm animal welfare as an economic 'good', and its materialisation in animal-derived food products. This has significant implications for the nature and communication of welfare 'evidence' and the manner in which it is articulated within an increasingly market oriented delivery framework.

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"There's no chicken equivalent of Greyfriars Bobby or Black Bess. No cockerel ever dragged its master from a burning haystack, or risked its life to deliver a message behind enemy lines" (Sweet, 2004).

### 1. Introduction: what shapes animal welfare?

Farm animal welfare is a concept that emerged from scientific findings and civil anxieties about industrialised farm animal production through the second half of the 20th century (Harrison, 1964)

to become what is now an active component in food animal supply chains. There is a scientific history of ongoing debate, discussion and re-framing of the concept of animal welfare (Ohl and van der Staay, 2012). Yet, although science is accepted as an important reference point for understanding the welfare of animals, science alone cannot define what is good, or acceptable or poor as welfare, in the same way that rational economic principles cannot alone define how concern for animal welfare acts as an economic behavioural stimulus for consumers and other market actors. In agreement with Ohl and van der Staay (2012) we support the point that 'interpretation of welfare status and its translation into the active management of perceived welfare issues are both strongly influenced by context and, especially by cultural and social values' (p. 1). However rather than locating this within a discussion of society's moral culture, as they do, situated

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somewhere between biological functionality and economic consequence (Bailey Norwood and Lusk, 2011), we instead turn to the 'economy' as a cultural phenomenon and specifically the notion of 'economisation' (which we define below) as an active process involving various market-based technologies that enrolls farm animal welfare and farm animal bodies together into consumer lifestyles. This, we argue, shapes, how animal welfare performs or 'what it becomes' within the food market context. In short, we ask, borrowing from Haraway (2007); what happens when the market and farm animal welfare meet?

As Swedberg (2008, p. 57) observes, 'economic life is anchored in materiality'. The egg economy, for example, is anchored in animal bodies that are generated (selectively and artificially bred), qualified (assessed, certified) and mobilised (integrated into supply chains, sold through auction to processors, labelled/unlabelled as welfare-friendly meat). These various practices are constantly changing and innovating through such practices as the proliferation of industrial scale free-range egg production, through stockperson practices, and through adaptation to the growing integration of animal welfare values into the industrialised egg production systems. As a result, the animal bodies, as well as animal behaviour, are being 'modified' as the grip of animal welfare on egg marketization, and its growing profile as a commercial requirement, becomes stronger. Moreover, we might argue too that animal welfare is equally being 'modified' as animal welfare science-making practices themselves change in response to the entry of welfare into the 'economy', which includes commercial pressures, legislation and consumer concerns. In this way, technoscience and the market co-produce specific technologies which are shaping the animal body. Moreover, the animal body gives culturally-specific potentialities for the success or failure of the uptake of various market-based technologies.

To grasp the profundity of the implications of this entanglement between scientific knowledge-making practices, civil anxieties and the integration of farm animal welfare values into how the market performs we introduce the term 'co-modifying'. The processes and practices of 'co-modifying' animal welfare accepts that the practices of turning the concept of animal welfare as a set of abstract values into material practices are not homogenous or static but are context dependent, species-specific and market-suitable, none more so than in developing a higher welfare food product. To conceive this as modification, rather than 'co-construction' (Jasanoff, 2004) evokes the plasticity, modifiability of the animal body, the directionality of the concept of animal welfare and the level of public concern through entanglements with technologies of the market. The welfare-friendly chicken body is an achievement between the market, the animal and publics. We choose to not use 'co-construction' because we foreground an agentive matter along with concepts and knowledges that are modified as contingencies assemble and perform differently, as opposed to a merely social matter, built or constructed through the imaginaries of humans.

Our argument in this paper is that what welfare is depends increasingly on how it is enrolled in economisation processes (from production system redesign to marketing campaigns), how it is commodified both as product and as process. In this paper we analyse some of the vast array of scientific and commercial technologies as practices that are enacting multiple farm animal welfare realities through the process of marketisation. We aim through our analysis to offer a critical analytical perspective on what has happened, is happening and may happen so as to remain alert to how animal welfare is being shaped, modified, co-modified by technical, social, material and institutional arrangements in the economisation process.

To better conceptualise the process by which actions, devices and analytical descriptions are assembled, qualified and defined as

'economic' by both social scientists and market actors, Callon, in his writing with Koray Caliskan (Caliskan and Callon, 2009) introduces the concept of 'economization':

the processes that constitute the behaviours, organizations, institutions and, more generally, the objects in a particular society which are tentatively and often controversially qualified, by scholars and/or lay people, as 'economic' (2009, p. 370).

Thus, 'doing animal welfare' becomes a broad array of technics, practices and materialities to meet reasoning present in the 'market', rather than in the sole interest of improving animal welfare. Economization, they argue, consists of three key agents: theories of the economy, established and refined through social and academic practice; the products themselves whose "materiality influences the modes of valuation that are possible and their outcomes" (2009 p. 370) and; institutional and technical arrangements that allow human agents to act within markets.<sup>2</sup> We find 'economization' a highly valuable conceptual starting point for an examination of the growth of farm animal welfare as an economic concern within the agri-food sector. While our focus in this paper is the shell egg market, our analysis has relevance for other food animal sectors. In this next section we discuss Caliskan and Callon's (2009) first agent, theories of the economy in relation to animal welfare, noting the existence of a substantial body of economic theory applied to the issue of farm animal welfare (for a review see McInerney, 2004; FAWC, 2012; Bailey Norwood and Lusk, 2011), and the influence of Supply Chain Management Theory to contemporary industry thinking in the agri-food sector. This is followed by sections discussing the material and institutional dimensions of economisation. Throughout we interpret empirical findings from a series of interviews with farm assessors, egg producers and processors for higher welfare food products, and from ethnography carried out within supply chain spaces of the higher welfare animal production systems, including farms and abattoirs, for poultry, pigs and cattle. This research formed part of the EU WelfareQuality<sup>®</sup> study on retailing and farm assessment practices. The interviews and ethnography focused on understanding how farm animal products reached supermarket shelves and how the various claims made, through packaging, labelling, branding and logos, that the animal had lived a better quality of life, were developed and constructed. Our analysis has focused not on the opinions or attitudes of personnel in the supply chain, but rather used their knowledge and understanding of how the animal body is grown, assessed, slaughtered, sold, to support our interpretation of how the animal body and animal welfare are co-modified through market-based technologies.

## 2. Economization and farm animal welfare

In his recent writings, the French sociologist Callon (1998, 1999) has argued for a new understanding of what he refers to as the 'performativity' of markets. Drawing on his previous work on Actor-Network Theory and upon the concept of *agencement* (socio-technical configurations in which agencies and arrangements are no longer separate from each other), Callon, like Granovetter (1985), maintains that the economy and society are successively entangled and disentangled leading to the analytical position of 'rehabilitat[ing] social relations' in the study of markets. He writes:

This substitution of the socio-technical *agencement* for the individual-human-agent embedded in institutions, conventions,

<sup>2</sup> Caliskan and Callon (2009) introduce these three agents in a slightly different order to that which we employ in this paper.

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