How animal welfare standards create and justify realities

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Abstract

Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot tell us that we live in a plural world in which actions are justified in multiple ways. Moreover, Anne Marie Mol argues that things, certainly including animals, are always multiple, their very existence dependent on the particular practices in which they are implicated. Thus, animal welfare policies must be understood in light of both the ways in which animals are ‘practiced’ and the particular justifications provided for these practices. Such policies make claims based on the practices involved in animal-human interactions and are justified based on appeals to the scientific (industrial), civic, market, and domestic worlds, among others. Thus, animal welfare policies must necessarily involve compromises among both the multiple ways in which animals are ‘practiced’ and the multiple ways in which those policies may be justified.

Keywords: animal welfare, anthropomorphism, justification, policies, practices, standards

Introduction

Perhaps I had best begin this paper by noting what it is not about. I shall not argue that one or another approach best illustrates the moral, ethical, or just stance we should take in our relations with animals in general, or with farm animals in particular. Nor shall I argue that our joint or individual endeavours to pursue the best, most appropriate, most feasible, most efficient, most effective, or most scientific policy, with respect to farm animals, has been thwarted in some way or another by politics. Although, in certain instances, that might well be the case, my goals here are quite different. What I shall attempt to do in this paper is first to ask what we mean when we set standards, laws, or regulations with respect to animal welfare. Then, I will examine, borrowing from Boltanski and Thévenot (2006 [1991]), not what constitutes just treatment for animals, but how particular practices associated with animals are justified. Furthermore, I shall argue, building on the work of Anne Marie Mol (2002), that animals, like all other things in the world, are multiple; they exist for us through the practices by which we encounter them.

Standards

The modern world is a world of standards (Brunsson & Jacobsson 2000; Bingen & Busch 2005). There are standards for everything from objects of art (Brownell 1917) to education (Apple 2006) to technoscientific ‘reference materials’ (National Institute of Standards and Technology 2007) to laying hens (Welfare Quality 2009c) to farm labour (Brown & Getz 2008). As Star and Lampland (2009, p 10) put it:

Standardizing has become a central feature of social and cultural life in modernity. The purpose of standardizing — to streamline procedures or regulate behaviours, to demand specific results, or to prevent harm — is rarely queried because it has come to be understood as a valuable and necessary, even if cumbersome, process.

In short, despite their ubiquity, standards are at best poorly understood. Furthermore, they are usually understood as ordering devices — devices that (re)order an already extant reality that exists ‘out there’. I want to begin by challenging that view. I want to argue that standards are not merely classifying and ordering devices (although they are surely that), but that standards are also recipes for reality (Busch 2011).

Consider the case of standards for poultry production. In industrial poultry production it is commonplace that production is actually outsourced to individual farmers who are expected to build poultry barns to house 50,000 birds or more. The specifications (or standards) for these barns are often supplied as well. Moreover, the birds are usually of a particular standard breed. The feed that is used to nourish them, the placement of that feed in the barn, the frequency of feeding and watering, procedures to be used to reduce lameness in flocks (eg disease reduction, diet, humane culling), the training required by staff involved in raising the birds, even the way in which the barn should be cleaned after each flock has passed through it, is subject to a set of standards. Similarly, in many nations, the disposal of