

Holy Cow!

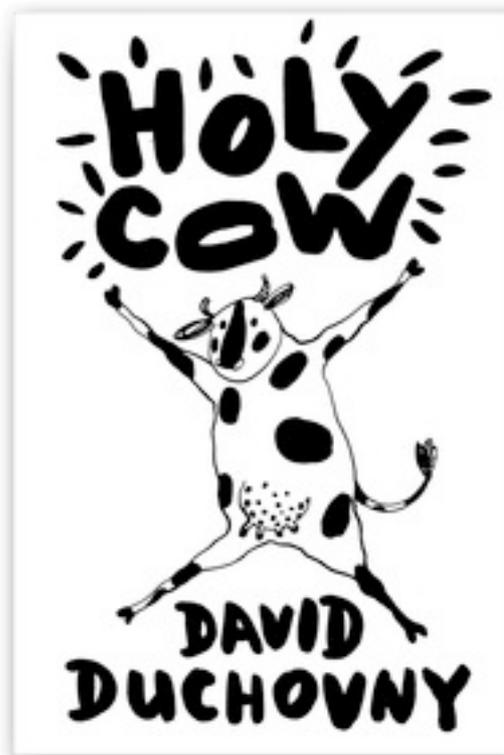
keywords: production animals, cows, animal welfare, animal law, EU Animal Welfare Legislation

Holy cow! Again with the red meat, hamburgers and sausages!

This must have been the reaction of many after reading the news related to the WHO report (<http://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/releases/2015/cancer-red-meat/es>), warning of the possible risk of contracting bowel, prostate or pancreatic cancer due to the excessive consumption of red or processed meats¹.

Good heavens! My gosh! These are some alternatives to the colloquial expression “Holy cow!” widely used in England before the First World War and popularized in American comic books, as Robin tells his partner: “Holy Cow, Batman!” It is not easy to find a good translation for colloquial expressions, as they are used in situations that require prior knowledge from their users and are subject to interpretation. Colloquial expressions are abundant and despite being difficult to understand, they are the heart of a language.

A while ago I stumbled across (literally!) a book that I wasn’t looking for in a bookshop specialising in English language books. The title “HOLY COW”² has nothing to do with the sacred cows of India, although it seems that the origins of the English expression “Holy cow!” does have some connotations of the Hindu tradition of respecting these animals. However, connotations aside, what is certain is that this book ended up in my hands and I didn’t put it down until I had read the last page.



¹ Sobre las carnes rojas y procesadas, vid, en detalle, OMS (<http://www.who.int/features/qa/cancer-red-meat/es/>).

² DUCHOVNY, David, Holy Cow (London 2015).

The book is worth reading. It is a first person account of a happy cow, Elise Bovary (a wink towards Flaubert), whose life is transformed by the impact (“Holy Cow!!!”) of witnessing, from the window of the farm where she has lived peacefully her whole life with her family, her friend Mallory, and pigs, turkeys and hens, the disappearance of small farms as they are replaced by industrial meat farms. However, we are not given an explanation as to why Elise’s mother disappeared one day. Elsie Bovary sees through a TV monitor how hens are crammed into cages that are piled five stories high, pigs cramped against one another in pens and cows, just like her, dying amidst rivers of blood. Her surprise upon awakening to this hard reality makes her discover the term “meat” and makes her think that humans are able to eat anything, with little bit of salt and butter.

Elsie Bovary tells us that she is not willing to live another minute waiting to have her throat slit and turned into pieces of meat to be served at the table. From the beginning of the story, she expresses her disbelief as to why humans drink the milk of cows when they don’t go and ask the owner of the farm “Hey, could I try some of your milk?” when she is breastfeeding. As a result - and I won’t reveal anything more about the plot - she decides to escape the farm with two of her best friends: Shalom, a grumpy pig and Tom, a sophisticated turkey (according to himself) who cannot fly, but can use an iPhone with his beak.

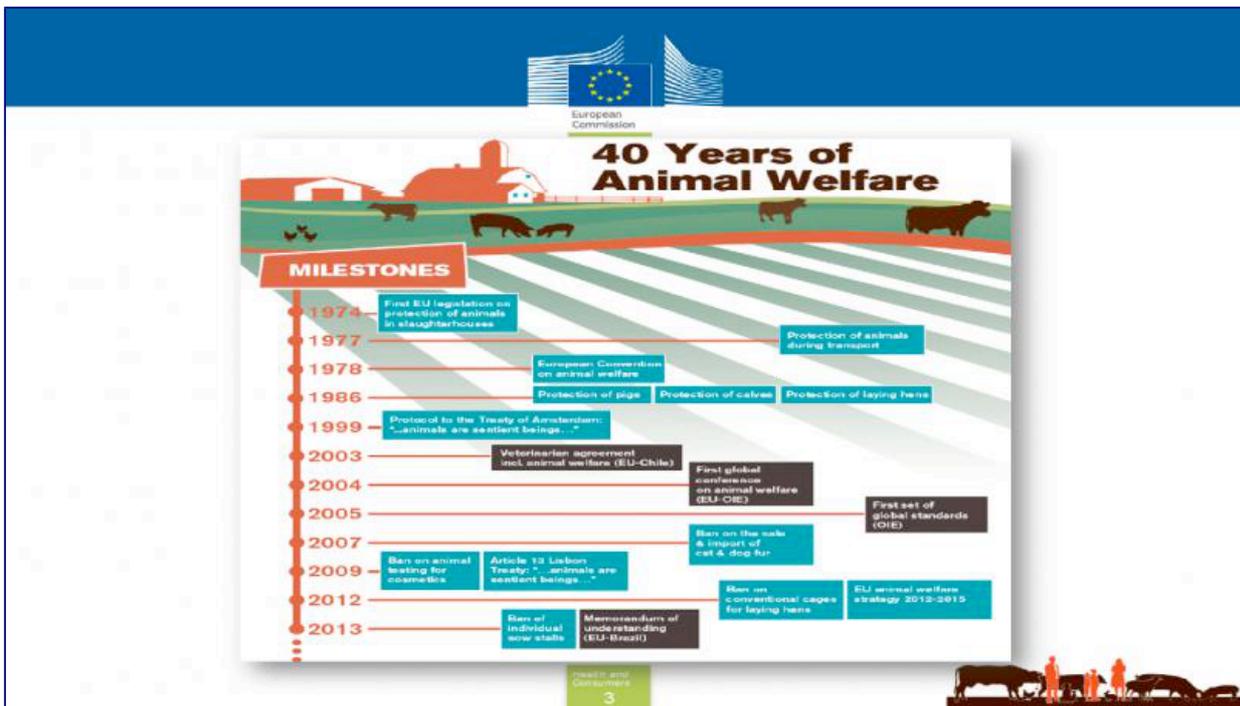
The book is humorous, but it is not a mere satire, rather the author looks at the lives of animals in an intelligent, comprehensive and insightful way, speaking with ease and confidence. The author, well known as an actor, reveals himself as a defender of farmed animals that we classify as “production animals”, a term used to hide the reality of the meat industry, which doesn’t aim to provide an idyllic life for animals, but to ensure supply for supermarkets.

Indeed the WHO report (<http://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/statements/2015/processed-meat-cancer/es/>) sparked controversy and its findings are an indisputable reality that will continue to receive opposing opinions. But, as one of the authors of the report has said³, people must decide who they believe: corporations or scientists. Meat consumption is excessive all over the world and causes diseases. This is a proven fact. To stop eating meat and adopting a vegetarian or vegan diet is more than a personal and ethical choice, it is a demonstration of unity and respect towards animals whom we share the world with, even though we don’t interact or live with them as we do with dogs or cats.

For 40 years the EU regulation for production animals (http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/health_food-safety/pressroom/docs/40_years_of_animal_welfare_en.pdf), has intended to ensure welfare standards that respect the animals habits, needs and interests. The first European regulation related to farmed animals was created in 1974, which was a European Directive controlling the slaughter of animals. But it wasn’t until 1999 and the Treaty of Amsterdam that regulated, in one of its annexes⁴, the treatment of animals as "sentient beings" in stature, transport and slaughter. This is the idea reflected in the Lisbon Treaty art. 13. A central component of European legislation for animal welfare is the Directive 98/58/CE of 20th July 1998 (<http://www.derechoanimal.info/bbdd/Documentos/93.pdf>), regarding the protection of animals in farming practices, establishing the minimum standards for the upkeep of farmed animals, while other directives refer to the welfare of animals during transport and slaughter.

³ Kurt Straif, Jefe del Programa de Monografías del IARC (International Agency for Research of Cancer), órgano de la OMS

⁴Treaty of Amsterdam amending the Treaty on European Union, the Treaties establishing the European Communities and related acts. Protocol on Protection and Welfare of Animals annexed to the Treaty of the European Community. Official Journal, C. 340, 10.11.1997.



In Spain, the law 32/2007 of 7th November, for the care of animals in production, transport, experimentation and slaughter is the only legislative in animal protection with a general scope. Spain has lacked a general animal protection law for years, one that would end the legislative mess that makes improving animal protection difficult.

Legislation is a means to control reality, in this case farming practices. But it is not enough for legislation to merely exist, it should be publicised (many people are unaware of it), experts should be instructed on the application of the legislation and a social conscious should be created through education at all levels, making us consider cows as sentient beings and not only as producers of bottles and cartons of milk. With his book, David Duchovny shows us the way towards a mutual understanding and acceptance of the needs of animals, which the world desperately needs.

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