How do cows become Australian?

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Abstract

This paper explores the ways in which cows were constructed as Australian during the recent debate over the treatment of cattle in Indonesian abattoirs. While animals do not have nationalities as such, let alone citizenship, the concern expressed for the cattle was framed as something owed because they were Australian rather than simply being generic animals deserving of humane treatment. As such cows became autochthonous. Using a discursive approach applied to data extracted from news coverage and cartoons, the paper traces the debate, beginning with the question of ownership, then outlining the key themes in the discussion, and implications for the construction of national identity and nationalist sentiment.

Keywords – Australian cattle, Australian cows, autochthonous, ownership, nationalism

Word count - 3400

Introduction

On 30 May 2011, an exposé of the treatment of cattle in three Indonesian slaughter houses was aired by the ABC program Four Corners. Cattle were shown having their limbs and tails broken, their eyes gouged, and being repeatedly slashed with blunt knives. Incidents of kicking and whipping were also shown. A key feature of the report was that the cattle were identified as ‘Australian’. In the Four Corners synopsis phrases such as “horrifying cruelty”, “slow and hideous deaths”, “die in agony” were used to indicate the nature of the treatment (ABC 2011a: online). The program triggered an immediate public outcry, and a demand that urgent measures be taken to protect ‘Australian cattle’ from further mistreatment. Directly after the program, Joe Ludwig, the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, stated in a press release that he was “shocked by the footage and the treatment of the animals involved” and had “ordered an immediate investigation” (Ludwig 2011a: online). On 7 June, the Minister registered the Export Control
(Export of Live-stock to the Republic of Indonesia) Order 2011, which suspended “the export of live-stock to the Republic of Indonesia for a period of 6 months.” (Ludwig 2011b: online). Although these actions had the immediate effect of somewhat appeasing the outraged public, it created other problems, such as a diplomatic predicament with an insulted Indonesian government (Australian Associated Press 2011: online), and a survival crisis for many involved in the cattle industry (Rout 2011: 10). On July 6 the Minister therefore repealed the order so trade could resume (Ludwig 2011c: online).

Our concern in this paper is to explore the ways in which the cattle in question were constructed as Australian. As Homi Bhabha (2000) has argued, nations exist in narration – they are talked into being. Talk about Australian cows is part of the nation-building project that became significant under John Howard, where the orientation of Australia’s identity moved away from the Asian region, where Paul Keating had tried to ground it, back to Europe (Fozdar and Spittles 2009; Joppke 2004). The discourse around civilisation and barbarism that found its way into the cattle debate mirrored many of the themes which have been identified in recent Australian expressions of nationalism and can be understood in terms of Huntington’s clash of civilisations (Huntington 1997), feeding into the Orientalist binary that sees the West as superior to the East (Said, 1977).

**Approach**

This paper uses a discursive approach, as outlined by Fairclough (1993). This approach takes any ‘discursive event’ as simultaneously a piece of text (something produced in language), an example of discursive practice (in terms of production and interpretation), and an instance of social practice (existing within a broader social structural dimension). The discourse thus represents reality, enacts social relations and establishes identities. Discourses are linked to ideology. Thompson (1984; 1990) argued that language can be used ideologically, and is most effective when discourses
become naturalized, achieving the status of common sense. Thus, as Billig (1995) has noted, nationalism is most commonly expressed as ‘banal nationalism’ – it is banal in its invisibility and ‘taken-for-grantedness’. Here, we take a brief look at the banal nationalism of Australian cow-making.

For this paper we undertook a search, using the database Factiva, of media reports on the issue for the month following the airing (from May 31st to June 30th 2011). Key word searches were undertaken for ‘Australian cattle’ initially, and then targeted searches using this term plus Islam/Muslim; civilised/barbaric; humanitarian; Christian; nation. A further search of ‘our cattle’, ‘Australian cows’, ‘Aussie cattle’ and ‘Aussie cows’ was also undertaken. ‘Aussie cows’ was not found, and ‘Aussie cattle’ was used rarely, mostly in regional or local newspapers, but also interestingly in New Zealand and Jakarta. While there is not space here to explore the data in detail, some major themes are outlined briefly.

Before proceeding, we wish to pre-empt criticism at the outset that the treatment of the animals in question was indeed cruel – this is not a concern for the social scientist who is focussed on the construction of social phenomena and not their moral dimensions. Thus we leave aside the question of whether public/political opinion was a valid expression of empathy for the cattle and outrage at their cruel treatment, and focus on the construction of the cows as Australian and the implications of this.

Tracing the number of times the term of ‘Australian cattle’ has been used in the media indicates the high levels of interest in this story. Graphs of the term’s use over the years leading up to 2011 reveal very low usage. Figure 1 demonstrates the massive increase in June 2011 resulting from the Four Corners program.
The discussion over the two week period revolved around the appropriate treatment of animals and the possible economic consequences to the Australian beef industry of the live export ban. This latter theme came to take precedence in the weeks since this initial research was undertaken, with the result that the trade was resumed by early July.

**Whose cows?: Legal definitions of ownership**

The Australian Cattle Trade Rules (ACTR) state that the formal transfer of cattle ownership occurs when - “Title to the cattle subject to the Contract passes to the Buyer free from encumbrances and all other adverse interests on full payment of the Contract Amount, unless the Contract specifies that title passes at some other time” (Grain Trade Australia 2010a: 3). In other words, “in most auction systems legal ownership changes upon the fall of the hammer” (Commonwealth of Australia 1999: 45). Beyond this, according to the recently updated Australian Standards for the Export of Livestock, the Australian Government’s jurisdiction over exported cattle ends when the animals are disembarked at an overseas port, after which jurisdiction transfers to the importer from that country (Commonwealth of Australia 2011: 10). After disembarkation in Indonesia, title once

**Figure 1:** Weekly incidence of the term ‘Australian cattle’ appearing in newspaper articles 2011 (27 December 2010 to 12 June 2011)

(Source – Factiva database)
again transfers, as “feedlotter’s and traders…lose ownership of their cattle at the abattoir and have no control over the butcher” (Meat and Livestock Australia 2006: 5).

The reason the issue of ownership is relevant is both in terms of the grammatical accuracy of the term ‘Australian cattle’ but also the issue of where rights inhere. Hannah Arendt (1973 [1951]) and, more recently, Craig Calhoun (2007) have argued that the continuing value of the nation-state is in its ability to protect the rights of its citizens. No other institutional structure has that ability. Thus while an argument for ‘human rights’ and ‘animal rights’ as general universal principles is useful insofar as it insists on a set of inviolable rights that should apply to all humans and all animals regardless of their membership of a particular nation-state, it is this membership that affords the institutional structure from within which these rights can be demanded and breaches of them redressed. As Arendt (1973 [1951]) pointed out, rights are a reflection of state power. Media coverage of the Australian cattle debate noted that international standards for animal welfare, specifically those of the World Organisation for Animal Health, are in fact lower than Australian standards, emphasising that it is the Australian standards that Australians would wish the Indonesians to live up to. It also made it clear that such international bodies have little jurisdiction over actual practices in sovereign nations.

Indeed, in the current debate, the focus was not on the rights of cattle as cattle per se, but as specifically ‘Australian’ cattle. Almost universally the cattle were identified in media reports and by politicians and others commenting on the issues, as ‘Australian’ cattle. While there were some lone voices suggesting that in fact the fate of all cattle being slaughtered in Indonesia should be of concern, regardless of their provenance, this was not the main line of argument. As such, the argument is a form of identity politics, which argues for the rights of ‘Australian’ cattle due to their Australian-ness, rights which go beyond the rights of other cattle being slaughtered in Indonesia.
The link was clearly the duty of care that ‘the Australian people’ had to ‘Australian cattle’ - it is ‘the Australian people’ who were ‘horrified’ at the treatment of ‘Australian cattle’ leading the argument that ‘Australian cattle’ must be trackable through the Indonesian system in order to ensure they, but not other cattle, are treated appropriately. The notion of the Australian cow is clearly rhetorical – it is not a reflection of a real entity but a construction that positions the cow and the nation in particular ways in relation to other things (non-Australian cows, countries other than Australia).

‘Our’ Australian cows

We now wish to provide some examples of the ways in which media reports and government officials identified the cows as Australian. Cows are clearly not autochthonous – they are not indigenous to Australia, but a colonial import. The only sense in which cows can be called Australian is that they have been bred in Australia and have been owned by Australian cattle farmers. In terms of legal ownership, according to the information above, the animals are Indonesia’s at the point of sale. How is their Australian-ness constructed, then? Mostly it is by the constant linking of the words Australian/our and cattle/cows, as the excerpts below demonstrate (emphasis added).

RSPCA Australia Chief Scientist – “We would need to be absolutely satisfied that the welfare of *Australian cattle* could be assured from the time that they leave Australia to the point of slaughter.” (ABC 2011b: online).

ANTHONY ALBANESE (Minister for Infrastructure and Transport) – “There was a problem of keeping on track with where *our cattle* were going. That is why the decision was made. I think it is the right thing to do” (ABC 2011c: online).
ANTHONY ALBANESE - “What we've said is that we want to make sure that the appropriate systems are in place before we resume the trade. That's the right thing to do. The problem - the problem as I understand it, and I don't pretend to be an expert on live cattle exports, but the problem was that of identification was that there's a system whereby Australian cattle are put into feeding areas or what have you, then get disbursed to different abattoirs and there was a problem of keeping on track with where our cattle were going. That's why the decision was made. I think it's the right thing to do. The industry is important but it's also the right thing to do to make sure that you don't have the sort of abuse that we saw and I think Australians reacted quite rightly, with horror to, that night” (ABC 2011d: online).

LARISSA WATERS – “Look we are pushing for an immediate ban to live cattle exports. The Four Corners story was absolutely horrifying …. I know how horrific those slaughter houses are and we have a responsibility to make sure that both our producers but also our cattle are being looked after here...” (ABC 2011e: online).

“Only four of the 120 or so Indonesian abattoirs where Australian cows end up use stun guns, which are mandatory in Australia and the European Union” (Marks 2001: online).

“Don Heatley, the chairman of Meat and Livestock Australia, said yesterday that the industry body was ‘urgently investigating every avenue’ to ensure that all Australian cattle were handled properly in that country” (Marks 2001: online).

The extracts clearly link the moral imperative, doing “the right thing”, with the Australian-ness of the cattle. It is also useful to consider the alternative words that could be used and in fact were used in some instances to describe the cows. Analysis reveals that at various points they are referred to as
‘Australian cattle’, ‘Australian cows’, and ‘our cows’, but also more generally as ‘beasts’, ‘head of cattle’, and ‘stock’ – these latter, arguably more distant, terms that make no reference to Australia and do not differentiate cows shipped from Australia from others, were mostly used when an economic argument about the Australian livestock industry was being made.

The question then is partly one of jurisdiction. What right have Australians, both the general public, but ultimately their government, to comment on, let alone interfere with, the way in which workers in another country treat livestock? If the cows are seen as Indonesian, or as merely stateless animals, Australia clearly has no such right. Thus the cows must be conceptualised as Australian in order to justify such a territorial incursion. Interestingly, the original alarm had been raised by an animal welfare group called ‘Animals Australia’, whose surreptitiously recorded footage of animals in Indonesian abattoirs was what sparked the Four Corners coverage of the issue. Again the nomenclature is illustrative of the notion that welfare is due to animals in some way associated with Australia. The Australian-ness of the animals was reinforced in the visual footage that accompanied news coverage of the issue – shots of cattle in the Australian outback and on farms added to this notion that cows are somehow autochthonous to Australia.

**Orientalism**

The Australian-ness of the cows was also constructed in the context of the Muslim-ness of Indonesia and of their slaughter. A majority of the newspaper articles made reference to this in some form (see Fozdar, in prep). The key binary of civilisation/barbarism was constructed around the Islamic requirement for halal slaughter and the level of development of Indonesia, playing into traditional Orientalist discourses (Said, 1977).
Anthropomorphism

A further feature of the discourse was the ways in which cows are treated as being like humans in terms of their nationality, and their rights. The literature on animal anthropomorphism, that is the representation of animals as having human characteristics, tends to focus on the ways the ‘thoughts’ and feelings of animals are humanised. Little research exists on the ways animals are seen as members of the nation-state. In the Australian cows debate several news articles and politicians’ speeches talked of barbaric practices, torture, and suffering in human terms. Additionally, visual images of cattle, as well as long shots of animals being abused, and on farms in Australia, often included tight ‘face’ shots, allowing audiences to look into the ‘soulful’ (and surprisingly human) eyes of the cows.

Cows and Asylum seekers

While there has been almost no recognition of the irony of Australians’ response to asylum seekers as opposed to cattle, this has been picked up in some quarters, including on media commentary blogs, and a number of cartoons. It seems an obvious thing to juxtapose Australia’s concern for its cows, and its lack of concern for people seeking asylum in Australia, both phenomena being fundamentally connected to processes of globalised trade, and both of which had become significant political issues simultaneously. Independent MP Andrew Wilkie did link the two when arguing for cessation of the entire live trade industry in three years:

Mr Wilkie said the government had lost its way on this and other issues. "Coming as it does at the same time as the abominable Malaysia deal I feel compelled to call on the Government to find its moral compass," he said (Johnston 2011: online):
The images below have been selected from blogs and other web based sources, rather than print newspapers, as examples of the creative juxtaposition of the issues by cartoonists.

Source – (Kudelka, 2011, online)

Source – (De Saxe 2011: online).
Source – (able2know 2011: online)
All of the cartoons illustrate the irony of asylum seekers, people, being given less humane consideration than animals, using the motif of international movement. The juxtaposition powerfully demonstrates how valuable the protection of the nation-state can be.

**Conclusion**

The ways in which the duty of care for the cattle was constructed around notions of their Australian-ness is an example of banal nationalism. We have not analysed here the links constantly made during the debate between the ‘barbaric’ treatment and Islam, but this theme fed directly into the current discursive field that constructs Islam as Other and alien within an Australian context (Humphrey, 2007; Yasmeen, 2010). Considering how discursive events simultaneously represent reality, enact social relations and establish identities (Fairclough, 1993), the phenomenon can be seen as serving as an opportunity for Australians to feel proud of their own humane and civilised approach to animal welfare, and the Indonesians’ lack thereof – an opportunity to take pride in their own identity through outrage at others’. It is fundamental to this project that the cows in question be constructed as Australian. However, there is also a pragmatic reason for their construction as Australian, as it is within the context of the protection of the nation-state that rights, animal or human, can be argued for (Arendt, 1973; Calhoun, 2007). It is unclear which of these imperatives, the building of ethno-nationalism or the making of a more ‘civic’ argument about rights, was the stronger in producing the cows as Australian. It is likely both were important.

**References**


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1 “Passing of the title and risk: passing of title specifies at which point the legal title (ownership) of the cattle goes from seller to buyer….ACTR stipulate that title will pass once full payment is received” (Grain Trade Australia 2010b: 22).

ii According to the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF), “The Australian Standards for the Export of Livestock set the basic standards for the conduct of the livestock export trade, as required by the Australian, state and territory governments”. The most recent update was 27 April 2011 (DAFF 2011: online).