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Backa, Andreas

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Andreas Backa

“My Responsibility, My Food” Meat, Slaughter and Self-sufficiency

Abstract

This article examines views on meat, slaughter and human-animal relations in the contemporary self-sufficiency trend. The point of departure of the analysis is ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with individuals striving towards becoming more self-sufficient in the region of Ostrobothnia, Finland. The focus is on the interviewees’ narration of their practices and experiences of animal husbandry, and more specifically on the role of affect and body in the killing of animals for human consumption. The material is analysed utilising cultural analysis inspired by phenomenology, and the findings are discussed from the perspective of post-domesticity. The analysis shows how the interviewees negotiate and justify their choices regarding meat, and why they prefer self-sufficiency farming and home slaughter to industrial agriculture and slaughter. This form of small-scale animal husbandry is characterised by affective relationships between bodies, which counteract the processes of post-domestic modernity that generate disconnectedness between animal and human, food and origin, producer and consumer.

Keywords: self-sufficiency, small-scale farming, animal husbandry, meat, slaughter, human-animal relations, modernity, post-domesticity, corporeality, affect

© Andreas Backa

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3367-4549>

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Introduction

Recently, there has been a lot of discussion regarding animal ethics in Finland, as well as across the whole Western world (e.g. *Helsinki Times* 2019; 2018; YLE 2019a; 2019b). Among other things, it has been argued that it is necessary to reduce meat consumption because of climate change, which is seen as a consequence of human activity. Further, ethical issues regarding the use of animals in the production of food (meat, milk, eggs etc.) and clothes (e.g. fur), and animal-keeping in itself has been framed by some as a form of exploitation of nonhuman bodies¹. The climate discourse has lately grown especially strong, and is now embraced not only by environmentalists and activists, but also by mainstream media and most of the political establishment. Still, critical voices have claimed that we are not doing enough, and protest movements such as, for example, “Fridays for future” (e.g. Svenska YLE 2019a; 2019b) inspired by climate activist Greta Thunberg, are trying to influence the development of society through protests and lobbying. Worry, and perhaps a feeling of helplessness about the climate and politicians not doing enough, nor realising how serious the situation actually is, have led to some people starting to create change by adjusting their habits and ways of living on a personal level, for example, the zero-waste movement, plastic-free living and avoiding travelling by airplane (e.g. Johnson 2016; Terry 2015; Watson 2014).

In the contemporary self-sufficiency trend (Backa 2018; 2019; Ford 2019; Prody 2015; Brown 2011; Holloway 2002, 2001), which is the focus of this article, one can also find the same kind of worry about the climate and the environment, as well as strong criticism of industrial farming and livestock production. Yet, few of those who are striving for self-sufficiency in the material I study seem to choose to become vegetarians, or try to avoid, for example, clothes made of animal products. On the contrary, small-scale animal husbandry and the use of natural clothing materials (plant-based as well as cellulosic fibres) are viewed in a positive light, and as a possible solution to problems caused by consumerism and the use of synthetic fabrics instead of natural materials such as, for example, wool, cotton and hemp. In this article, I examine the views on animal husbandry, meat-eating and home slaughter among some individuals striving towards becoming more self-sufficient in the Swedish-speaking parts of Ostrobothnia, Finland. The research material consists of five interviews about self-sufficiency and one field observation during home slaughter, and it is examined using culture analysis (Ehn & Löfgren 2012; Frykman 2012; Frykman & Gilje 2003; Ehn & Löfgren 2002). The aim is to make visible ideals and values concerning meat and human-animal

1 For additional views on food and the use of animals for human consumption, see e.g. Kupsala 2019, Barnhill et al. 2018, Sandler 2015, Wilkie 2010.

relations, focusing on corporeality and affect (e.g. Frykman & Povrzanović Frykman 2016; Frykman 2012; Merleau-Ponty 1962 [1945]). How is home slaughter performed, and how is it motivated? How do the interviewees relate to farm animals, meat and slaughter? Before commencing the analysis, I would like to introduce the research material as well as the methodological framework of the article in more detail.

Research material and methodology

For a previous article (Backa 2018), I conducted seven interviews about self-sufficiency with people from the Swedish-speaking parts of Ostrobothnia in Finland. The interviews were semi-structured (e.g. Bryman 2016, 466–470; Hammersley & Atkinson 2010, 102, 117–120), and I also took photos and visited farms and gardens. In the present article I use examples from five of the interviews, in which the topics of animal-keeping, meat and slaughter were more explicitly discussed. I also followed up on one of the interviews with a field observation during duck slaughter. All of the interviewees were women. This is an interesting question, which I will not problematise in detail in this article. I imagine, however, that old patterns live on, and that home gardening and growing one’s own food is still perceived as belonging mainly to the area of responsibility of women. Further, self-sufficiency has a strong connection to the home (homing, homemade, etc.), and several of the interviewees were or had been home with children for longer periods of time, thereby having better possibilities of tending to animals or a garden. During the ethnographic work I recorded what we talked about, took photos, and kept a field diary in which I noted my experiences immediately after each field trip. The study is not auto-ethnographic in nature, but does have an element of such an approach (cf. Hammersley & Atkinson 2010, 204–205), since I have previous personal experience of organic farming, animal husbandry, and home slaughter. This ‘common ground’ also helped build a relationship with the interviewees, and facilitated exchange of opinions, knowledge and experiences.

Methodologically, the study is grounded in culture analysis (Ehn & Löfgren 2012; Frykman 2012; Ehn & Löfgren 2002), and is also inspired by the phenomenological approaches of, among others, Jonas Frykman and Nils Gilje (2003) and Mia-Marie Hammarlin (2008). The objective of such an approach is to try to create an understanding of human culture from the perspective of the examined community, through the observation of and participation in the practices in question. I consider both the interviews and the field observations, as well as my personal experience of farming and home slaughter, as forms of what Mika Mård has termed bodily participation (Mård 2018, 66–80). The aim of such a methodology is not to give subjective accounts of per-

sonal experiences, “but rather to use these experiences as an affect-coloured lens” (Mård 2018, 264), which supports and deepens the ethnographer’s understanding of the phenomenon explored. Being bodily present and an active participant, one can make use of all the senses – sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch – but one can also sense the atmosphere, and the different affects and moods related to places and practices. The interest in affect, writes Jonas Frykman and Maja Povrzanović Frykman, involves, in the first place, “a focus on bodies and embodiment, on ‘the very material of the body and those forms of embodied experience that often remain unseen, unnoticed and unrecognised’” (Frykman & Povrzanović Frykman 2016, 12). This study thereby places itself among the kinds of research which focuses on a “shift from research about bodies to a way of researching through bodies” (Evers 2006, 230). This approach entails an emphasis on affective experience, or what we feel “at the bodily level” (Evers 2006, 230).

Much of the groundwork for this type of research was laid by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962 [1945]) through his philosophy of the lived body (corporeality), and its relations to other bodies and to the world. One of the main ideas of Merleau-Ponty is that knowledge is embodied, meaning that the body knows how to do things – “it is knowledge in the hands” (Merleau-Ponty 1962 [1945], 166). This type of knowledge is significant for understanding the phenomenon of self-sufficiency because of the bodily nature of the practices. Further, the connection between embodiment and materiality is also accentuated, for example, in Merleau-Ponty’s (1962 [1945], 165) famous reading of the blind man’s stick, in which the stick becomes an extension of the body, making it possible for the blind man to perceive his surroundings using its point. To get used to a thing, in the words of Merleau-Ponty (1962 [1945], 166), “is to be transplanted into them, or conversely, to incorporate them into the bulk of our own body”. Another important aspect of the work of Merleau-Ponty is his idea of intersubjectivity. “Subjectivity is in effect a matter of intersubjectivity”, writes anthropologist Michael Jackson, commenting on Merleau-Ponty, “and experience is inter-experience”, meaning that it is only in relation to other bodies that a sense of self can emerge. It is by incorporating the views of others a person becomes a subject for himself (Jackson 1996, 26). It then becomes the task of the ethnographer to “recover the sense in which experience is situated *within* relationships and *between* persons if the lifeworld is to be explored as a field of intersubjectivity and not reduced to objective structures *or* subjective intentions” (ibid.). In other words, ethnographic fieldwork is concerned not only with the behaviour of other people, but also with the reciprocal experiences of the ethnographer himself and subject(s) of the study.

Background and previous research

In a previous article (Backa 2018) on the subject, I showed that self-sufficiency – according to the interviewees of the study – is about striving towards an ideal through practices such as small-scale farming, animal husbandry, gardening, and berry and mushroom foraging, among other things (cf. Ford 2019). The respondents also showed an interest in bartering, and preferred locally produced foods and buying directly from the farmer or through alternative food networks such as REKO² (e.g. Ehrnström-Fuentes, Jauho & Jallinoja 2019), if they were not themselves able to provide a certain food item. The self-sufficiency practices gave them, on the one hand, tangible results such as food or yarn, on the other hand, a feeling of being in control of their own time and life. Several of the interviewees felt that modern society is heading in the wrong direction, and that consumption and pollution pose serious threats to nature and mankind (cf. Ford 2019). Thus, for them, self-sufficiency represented a type of sustainable living and a resistance to the consumer society, environmental destruction and climate change. Corporeality seemed to play an important role in the practices I was studying (Backa 2018, 132–133), and in this article I elaborate further on the role of the body and affect in self-sufficiency, this time with attention to human-animal relations.

The concept of self-sufficiency in a Nordic context has been touched upon also in some ethnological studies (Marshall 2016, 90–100, 162; Wollin Elhouar 2014, 101–102, 171; Ulver 2012, 13), but is in my view a topic that deserves more attention, especially considering recent societal discussions and developments regarding sustainability, climate change and animal welfare. Striving towards self-sufficiency is in itself not a new phenomenon, but the idea has received renewed momentum and partly new content because of the climate question, as well as other contemporary trends such as anti-commercialism, authenticity, naturalness, downshifting and self-development (e.g. Ulver 2012). The self-sufficiency trend makes visible two contesting views on how to handle the climate crisis, and how to relate to the future (see also Wollin Elhouar 2014, 160). On the one hand, there is the idea that climate-smart technology will help preserve nature and save resources. On the other hand, some people believe that we need to dissociate ourselves from the concept of progress, and from large-scale operations and industrialisation, and instead look towards earlier methods of small-scale farming (ibid.). Further, self-sufficiency practices have been popularised and become more mainstream in the

2 REKO (REjäl KOnsumtion) is an alternative food network originating in Ostrobothnia, which links consumers to producers of local food with the help of social media (Facebook) for managing orders and sharing information (Ehrnström-Fuentes, Jauho & Jallinoja 2019, 2).

Nordic countries recently because of numerous books, TV-shows, blogs and online videos on the subject (e.g. Österåker 2015; Mandelmann & Mandelmann 2013; Lidström 2017; Bäckmo 2015). As such, self-sufficiency is a complex subject where many current trends related to sustainability, food, health and lifestyle intersect.

The Nordic self-sufficiency trend also has certain features in common with the so called back-to-the-land movement(s) in the United States (Prody 2015; Brown 2011; Ford 2019), among other things, an interest in local food practices and a search for the ‘good life’, community and belonging. In the United Kingdom, small-scale or ‘alternative’ modes of farming have been studied, for example, by Lewis Holloway (2001; 2002) from a human geography perspective. The latter studies are relevant for the article at hand since they also discuss ethical issues related to farming, such as animal births and deaths, meat and slaughter. The topic of slaughter has also been explored more explicitly in works by, for example, Noëlie Vialles (1994) and Rhoda M. Wilkie (2010). Perspectives critical of the use of animals for food, clothes and other products are found in philosophy (e.g. Regan 2004; Midgley 1983; Regan & Singer 1976) as well as in fields of research influenced by the so called ‘ethical turn’, such as critical animal studies. These viewpoints are, however, not discussed in detail here, since it is beyond the scope of this article.

With this as a brief background, I proceed to describe and analyse central themes of the research material, starting from the interviews. I have translated the interview citations from Swedish (dialect), and in some cases I have edited them slightly in order to make the meaning as clear as possible in the English language.

Slaughter and taboo

Already during my first interview, the theme meat and slaughter emerged. Agnes (ÖTA 333 ljud 3) told me how much work it requires to keep farm animals, and how much time it takes to slaughter, butcher and preserve meat, and therefore one sometimes needs to compromise. “It was really fun to try [sausage making], but I don’t know, it takes too much time. Somewhere that time needs to be saved up”, she told me. I asked about the family’s meat-eating preferences, and she told me that “it gets less and less all the time”, but “meat is such easy food [to buy], it satiates many quickly”. Agnes explained that they have had several different kinds of animals during the years, but at the moment they only have hens, primarily for the eggs and the manure. Her husband fishes, though, and she would like to take up hunting. The family keeps rabbits, but only as pets for the kids. They used to have meat rabbits,

but according to Agnes “they require too much feed to make it profitable. Plus, I don’t think slaughtering is any fun”.

Agnes told me further that she does not want to have that many animals at the moment because of lack of space, but the main reason for not wanting a lot of roosters is because of her dislike of slaughtering (cf. Holloway 2001, 304). That is also why she would prefer to grow more vegetables – “to avoid having to experience slaughter”. I asked if she usually performs the slaughter herself, and she replied that she does, and that she has learned the skill by watching videos on YouTube, and by just “having a go at it”. Agnes also said that in her experience, other people often have a hard time accepting home slaughter – “That’s what boggles people, it’s quite common”. Still, there seems to be a difference in how animal species are generally perceived in relation to what is viewed as food. Agnes explains that “you know that people eat chicken, and they have it in the meat counter, but not rabbit meat”. With her children in mind, Agnes said with a laugh that “it can’t be easy having me for a mom”. At the same time, she is happy that her children are not alienated from what slaughter and meat really means, and she records an incident some time ago when the children were playing with Lego together with the children from another family, which was into self-sufficiency farming as well.

”... and then that one came, and then they slaughtered it, and then ...” [laughter] I thought, how liberating it is to have someone who understands all of this, I mean, it’s not really something you talk about. They aren’t playing in that way anymore, but when you’re a kid, it’s important to play through things you have experienced. And I suppose it’s a bit the same for kids as for the grown-ups, you need someone in order not to feel different. Because, there aren’t that many who make everything themselves, but buy everything, and who don’t share this view about foraging [*ta tillvara*, also meaning ‘not letting anything go to waste’], taking care of the environment and everything. (ÖTA 333 ljud 3)

On the basis of Agnes’ narration, one can infer that there seems to be some sort of societal taboo around slaughter, which can make people “boggle” when they hear about someone slaughtering at home. This might be because there are not that many who slaughter for household use these days, and people have become used to buying meat from the supermarket. Most market halls and butcher’s shops where you could buy meat over the counter in the past are gone, too, making it difficult to obtain anything else than pre-packaged meat. The process of slaughtering and butchering animals has thus become hidden from ordinary people’s lives, as a result of larger and fewer farms, and the fact that all meat must be produced at a certified slaughterhouse (except

for small-scale household use). Or as Noëlie Vialles (1994) puts it in her study of slaughterhouses in south-west France, “animals are killed in invisible abattoirs, set a good distance from our normal activities”. This taboo becomes further accentuated when there is talk about rabbits, since it is not common to eat rabbit meat in Finland nowadays. The rabbit is rather considered a companion animal, which implies an affective relationship between human and animal. Companion animals also – unlike farm animals – “live in close spatial proximity with humans, sharing homes with them” (Kupsala 2019, 25).

There are not so many who have the option – nor the desire, perhaps – of combining animal keeping for household use with some type of job, since it requires a lot of time, labour, adequate barns and pasture. For these reasons, Agnes and her family are trying to eat less meat and more vegetarian dishes instead. Agnes appreciates that her kids have had the opportunity to learn and see for themselves where meat comes from, and that the kids have a family that takes environmental questions into consideration, and is keen on saving resources. This approach implies a different attitude toward slaughter, compared to, for example, the old peasant society, where children could be sent away to fetch some non-existent tool from a neighbour (Arnstberg & Björklund 2011, 54) when it was time to slaughter.

Critique of industrial slaughter

Another interviewee, Saga (ÖTA 333 ljud 1), has in the same manner as Agnes also tried to lessen meat-consumption. Still, she too, is acquainted with slaughtering, butchering, preserving meat and making sausage. Her husband is a farmer who has a cattle farm for organic beef, and the family also keeps sheep, rabbits and hens for household use. Saga makes use of wool from the sheep in order to spin her own yarn, and she has quite an extensive home garden, which means that most of the vegetables the family uses are home-grown (Backa 2018, 119–122, 127–129). She is, however, critical of meat-consumption, partly because slaughtering is tough, but most of all because of her dislike of large-scale and conventional farming.

So, I don't need the meat. I'd rather eat vegetarian, but at the same time I'm not entirely [vegetarian] either, because I know there will be too many roosters if you don't slaughter, and if a heifer dies because the calf is too large, then it is more worthy [*mervärdigt*, also “humane”] to take the life of the animal and preserve the meat, rather than not to. But I think we need to get ethics back into the production of meat – how we raise the animals, why, and how we care for the animals. (ÖTA 333 ljud 1)

Like many hobby farmers (Holloway 2001, 304–305), Saga too, would like commercial farms to adopt more ethical and conscious farming practices, and although she does not like slaughter, she nevertheless considers it to be a necessary part of keeping farm animals (cf. Holloway 2001, 304). On another occasion, Saga told me that in her opinion “slaughter is political” – that is, for her, the choice of home slaughter is a political act (see also e.g. Vialles 1994, 18) and a stand against large-scale agriculture and industrial slaughter. The implication is that since most people no longer have any experience of raising animals and slaughtering them, and almost everybody buys pre-packaged meat in the supermarket, they do not understand the value of it either.

If you are a meat-eater, you should be able to slaughter it yourself also. It’s a bit mean to say, but you should know the value of the animal if you are going to eat it. Otherwise you can just let it be. And I have perhaps come to the conclusion that I don’t think slaughtering is all that much fun. (ÖTA 333 ljud 1)

Thus, Saga aligns herself with those who criticise perspectives which treat “animals instrumentally as having only extrinsic or use value” (Holloway 2001, 295; see also Zwart 1997).

A similar critique is found in another interview as well. Instead of radically reducing meat-consumption, Christina (ÖTA 333 ljud 4) has opted for complete self-sufficiency regarding meat, milk and eggs. At the time of the interview she had – cats and dogs not accounted for – a bull, a cow with a calf, pigs, hens, ducks, meat rabbits and domesticated quails. Furthermore, she is a hunter and likes to participate in elk-hunting (*alces alces*). Her interest in animals and farming started when she was a summer worker at an open-air museum taking care of the animals there. Christina also came into contact with different types of livestock farming through a student work placement. There she started wondering why the animals were well at some farms, while they often were sick at others. This led to her later going for small-scale animal husbandry and meat-production for household use (Backa 2018, 122–126, 129–130).

Christina is nowadays quite used to slaughtering her animals herself, and she has also started teaching others who want to keep farm animals in a small-scale how to do it. Just as in the case with Saga, Christina thinks one should be able to slaughter, if one is to eat meat.

I felt more and more strongly that I cannot eat meat from some animal that has felt this bad [as the animals on some farms]. From there it went on, and today I’m at the level where I don’t eat meat from an animal which someone else has killed. “My responsibility,

my food”, sort of. I raise the animal; I end the life myself. Then it is somehow, in my world, “legal” to eat it [laughter]. If you understand what I mean. (ÖTA 333 ljud 4)

Christina explained that she does not like the industrialisation of animal production, and the mere thought of it makes her feel sick, but the alternative – being a vegetarian or a vegan – does not suit her either. For that reason, she has chosen to only eat meat from animals that she has raised (or hunted) herself.

Only one of my interviewees, Sigrid (ÖTA 333 ljud 6), has chosen to eat no meat whatsoever. I did not, however, get the impression that she thinks all kinds of animal-keeping are wrong *per se*, rather her critique was foremost about what Heidegger referred to as the “the mechanized food industry” (Heidegger 1977 [1954], 15).

Mass-production is mass-production. I don't see, that is, when I look at the meat industry, I feel mentally nauseous [*psykiskt illa*]. But I don't know if mass-production of vegetables is better in any way, it's just in another way. (ÖTA 333 ljud 6)

In other words, Sigrid seemed to share Christina's view of mass-production, but the insights led her to drawing partly different conclusions. For her, it was a feeling of disgust over the meat industry that triggered her to take action. Here, the ‘doing’ of emotions becomes accentuated, and emotions appear more as “a form of cultural politics or world making” (Ahmed 2004, 12). Sigrid did, however, not only reject meat-eating, but indeed also all kinds of mass-production, going for self-sufficiency instead.

The critique of factory farming and mass-production found among my interviewees is not unique. Similar lines of reasoning are present also in other current discourses on food, such as the foodie culture (Cairns, Johnston & Baumann 2010) and the slow food movement (Sassatelli & Davolio 2010), which both display a preference for local foods and small-scale, traditional means of production. The meat industry and “factory farming” have been criticised by proponents of animal rights (e.g. Regan 2004). Those who are striving for self-sufficiency, however, are mainly focused on producing the necessary food items themselves, rather than buying them.

Christina has, similarly to Agnes, obtained her knowledge about slaughter gradually, among other things, through a knowledgeable neighbour who used to be a pig farmer, but also by studying videos online.

Since nobody has told me how to slaughter, I had to look it up on YouTube. I felt a bit jittery about it the first time, having been sitting watching it on YouTube, and then going out to slaughter one of our own roosters that we had raised. (ÖTA 333 ljud 4)

Richard Bulliet has referred to contemporary Western society as post-domestic, meaning that people nowadays have almost no contact with “the animals that produce the food, fibre and hides they depend on, and they never witness the births, sexual congress, and slaughter of these animals” (Bulliet 2005, 3; cf. Holloway 2001, 297). Since the tradition of keeping animals small-scale and slaughtering at home on the farm has been broken, it becomes necessary for those who want to keep up this practice to acquire the necessary skills by some other means than in past times, that is, in the words of Tim Ingold, “through practical ‘hands-on’ experience” (Ingold 2000, 291). For contemporary self-sufficiency enthusiasts such as Christina, this is accomplished by watching videos on the internet, or by reading self-sufficiency books (e.g. Seymour 1981; Österåker 2015; Mandelmann & Mandelmann 2013). However, one also needs to ‘have a go at it’, and practice until the skill becomes “incorporated into the *modus operandi* of the body, through practice and experience in an environment” (Ingold 2000, 291).

Affective challenges

Closely related to corporeality is affective experience, and just as the other interviewees Christina also notes the emotional challenges in relation to slaughter, and how she always prepares herself the night before she is about to slaughter one of her own animals. If she is performing the slaughter on behalf of someone else, she talks it through with them on the phone the night before.

I think through what I’m going to do, so that I’m completely sure about it, so that there can be no doubts anywhere, because the animal will notice it the next day. So, always focus on that the animal should have as good a life as possible until it is completely gone. Then the next morning I have always thought, I’ll switch that off for now, you have to be, if I may say, “cold”, and just do what should be done and not panic whatever happens. Just do what needs to be done, but afterwards it’s possible that you will feel a bit downhearted [*leidon*, dial.] or something like that [laughter]. But it feels better knowing that the animal had a good life, all the way. (ÖTA 333 Ijud 4)

One could argue that the preparations for home slaughter are ritualistic in the sense that it is not only about practical arrangements, but also about getting into the required emotional state, as in preparation of a *rite de passage* (van Gennep 1965; Turner 1969). This is at least partly connected to the supposed taboo around slaughter – it is necessary to manage one’s affective state when a border is about to be crossed. If one fails to do this, the animals will notice immediately that something is wrong, and feel stressed about the situation. If an animal is stressed or frightened, the consequences could be that the

slaughter is more difficult to carry through, for example. It would also mean a failure to attain the ideal of the animal remaining calm until the very end, and being slaughtered without trauma (see also Holloway 2001, 303). Thus, in order to be successful, the human needs to stay calm, and act without any doubt of mind. Although Christina explains that she sometimes can feel a bit downhearted about it afterwards, she nevertheless considers home slaughter to be the best option, since it offers the best possible life (and death) for the animal. Like many hobby farmers, Christina is very scrupulous about the care of her animals, and about not causing them unnecessary suffering (cf. Wilkie 2010, 104–105, 151). I imagine she would also have agreed with Donna Haraway that “killing well is an obligation akin to eating well” (2008, 296).

I told Christina briefly about my own experiences of home slaughter. My wife had a burdensome illness some years ago – an oversensitivity to histamine in food – which made it difficult for her to eat most types of conventional meat. It was, however, possible for her to eat meat which had been deep-frozen immediately after slaughter. So, when a friend of mine, who owns a small-scale poultry farm, told me she had a surplus of rooster chickens, we thought we would try raising grass-fed chickens ourselves. I also told Christina about how I realised that it was only when I started slaughtering the chickens we had raised ourselves that I actually felt like I had a *real* choice whether or not to eat meat. Only then could I, so to speak, truly see the consequences of my choice to be a meat-eater, and make a choice whether to accept or reject it. The meat was also very valuable to us, since we had put a lot of work into it, and it was the only type of meat that my wife could eat.

Christina agreed, and went on to recount that most people do not know what slaughter actually is all about. It can look nasty, but one must be clear that the animal is completely unconscious and does not feel anything, Christina explained:

There are many YouTube clips where you can watch how terrible everything is, for example, when a pig is stuck, it kicks a lot. It looks nasty. If one doesn't manage to see what is really happening, if you look into the eyes of the pig, it's completely gone. So, it [the kicking] doesn't have anything to do with it feeling anything [...] I explained that to a couple whom I was slaughtering for, not this Sunday, but a week ago [...] I shot it with a gun, and the pig immediately fell on the side, and you need to be fast with the sticking, and the blood started squirting all over, that pig was so fierce [...] So I had to tell her: look it in the eyes! Go look in the eyes! Otherwise you will not do this again. (ÖTA 333 Ijud 4)

The critical moment in slaughter is the stunning, which should render the animal unconscious (Verhoeven, Gerritzen, Hellebrekers & Kemp 2015, 320).

If one is not used to slaughtering, though, one might interpret the muscle spasms that follow as the animal kicking because it feels pain or is trying to flee. This is, however, not the case, and Christina is careful to point out to her friends that they need to move closer and look into the eyes, so that they can see for themselves that the animal actually is unconscious.

In several of the interviews, the discussions about meat and animals often slid over into talk about slaughter among the interviewees who kept animals for the sake of meat (for example, Linda [ÖTA 333 ljud 5], kept goats only for milk). Clearly, home slaughter was a thought-provoking event, which was enclosed in a lot of emotion and challenges. Shortly after I had finished interviewing, I became interested in learning more about the practices related to self-sufficiency and slaughter. With the epigraph of the phenomenologists – “back to the things themselves” (Husserl 2001 [1900], 168) – in mind, I sent out a new request to a couple of my interviewees who were into animal husbandry. Shortly thereafter, I received a reply from Christina – she was going to slaughter ducks the following weekend, and I was welcome to participate. I decided to add another participant observation to the existing ethnographic material in order to learn more about home slaughter, and get an opportunity to observe, take photos and ask questions directly (rather than later in an interview setting). Below I briefly describe what happened during my second meeting with Christina.

Duck slaughter and ethical considerations

I had agreed to meet with Christina on a Sunday afternoon in September 2018. She was about to slaughter two ducks, and I was to observe and discuss home slaughter with her. I had visited her once before, so I knew where she lived, and that she had a home in the countryside where she, for several years now, has built up an extensive self-sufficiency farm from scratch with vegetable cultivation and small-scale animal husbandry. When I arrived, Christina’s husband was busy in the garden, so I went over to have a chat with him before entering their house. Christina’s husband is employed outside their homestead, but he was at home on this particular day because it was Sunday. When I met with Christina, she was a bit stressed, and told me that the timetable had changed. She had fetched some new ducks earlier that morning, and she wanted to see them before she decided which ones were to be slaughtered that day, and therefore she had not yet had time to do all the morning chores. My impression was – recalling what she had told me the last time we met – that she was not as well prepared as she would have wanted to be this time. She explained that I would have to join her in the cow barn, so we could have a talk while she took care of the milking, feeding and mucking. Living closely

together with animals in this way means that both humans and animals adjust to certain routines, and chores, such as milking and feeding at certain times of the day, that cannot be neglected. Or, as Christian Ferencz-Flatz puts it, “animal companions adapt to the daily schedule of humans, while humans in turn include the needs and activities of the animals in their routines” (2017, 225; cf. Haraway 2008, 262–263).

The cow barn is a small house which Christina and her husband had built themselves, mostly out of recycled materials, with just enough space for one cow and a calf. The cow was of a native breed, Northern Finncattle, and very companionable. Christina’s daughter was also with us, and I immediately noticed that she was very accustomed to being around all kinds of animals. She told me that there were bats on the hayloft, but that did not seem to bother her much. The cow was used to getting a treat of hay while Christina was milking, and seemed to have a pleasurable and quiet moment in her cubicle. Suddenly, the cow started putting hay in her water bucket and, surprised by her behaviour, I asked what it meant. Christina explained that the cow wanted someone to fetch her more water – it was her way of indicating to humans that the bucket was empty. This is one example of how “the bodily activities and behaviours of animal companions are to a large extent responsively attuned to those of humans” (Ferencz-Flatz 2017, 225). It was a silent communication, yet a very direct request, showing that the cow also had expectations on us humans.

Having finished the chores in the cowshed, the preparations for the slaughter began. The whole family was involved – Christina, her husband and their children all went into the duck pen and helped each other catch the ducks. Perhaps the ducks suspected something was afoot, since they ran away and did not want to be caught at first. Eventually, they calmed down, and Christina took one of them into her lap. She told me once again how important it is to stay calm, and to act accordingly. My thoughts went to the Nordic folk tradition, which states that one should never pity the animal to be slaughtered, otherwise it will die a slow death (*Finlands svenska folkdiktning VII*, 223). Unlike in the old peasant society, though, when stunning was not always employed (e.g. Kaarlenkaski 2016, 31–32; Arnstberg & Björklund 2011, 51–52, 55–56; Vialles 1994, 66–72), Christina was very strict about rendering the animal unconscious prior to the slaughter. With one of the birds under her arm, she went to a chopping block close by. She sharpened an axe with a Tupperware sharpener. With the bird still in her lap, she stunned it with the poll of the axe, and decapitated the unconscious animal with ease, and allowed it to bleed out while the wings were flapping from the muscle spasms which followed. Afterwards, Christina put the bird aside and washed away the blood from the

chopping block, so that the next duck would not have to see or smell the blood from the previous one. She also removed the wings and feet from the carcass.

Christina’s daughter had been looking forward to the slaughter with anticipation, since she likes beautiful feathers and has a whole collection of them. Immediately after the slaughter, she grabbed hold of the wings from one of the ducks, and started running around playing with them in an almost carnivalistic manner, while Christina was plucking and butchering the ducks. The butchering took place outside over an old sink in the garden. It was windy that day, and the feathers blew all over the place. She managed, however, to save most of the down, and put it in a plastic bag for later use. I told her I did not like hard wind that much, and that I was more of an ‘earth type’. Christina explained that she likes working with her hands and seeing tangible results, being in close contact with the animals and with the soil, and she described her philosophy in one word as *jordnära* – down-to-earth. This time Christina was particularly careful to preserve as much as possible, including the organ meats. She told me that something had gone wrong with the mating of the pigs, which meant they would not receive any piglets that year. Therefore, it was particularly important for the family to get as much out of the birds as possible, in case there would not be enough home-slaughtered meat, something that also indicated that Christina could not accept buying meat in the store. I asked her about how she stores and preserves meat products, and she told me that she primarily uses a freezer – in other words, what most people do. Her response strengthened my conclusion that her pursuit of self-sufficiency was not about some sort of longing for old ways of doing things, but rather an embodiment of ethical standards regarding food and human-animal relations (cf. Holloway 2001).

Concluding discussion

In his thesis about producer co-operative slaughter associations in Sweden, Lars Hansson notes that questions concerning law and ethics relating to slaughter have been discussed since the late nineteenth century. The common perception at the time seems to have been that animal cruelty was something which only existed in rural areas, where home slaughter and “primitive” pre-industrial means of production were still prevalent. Modern industry, however, was supposed to bring about new, more rational and humane production conditions (Hansson 2004, 86). These are themes which have echoed throughout the whole twentieth century, during which modernity has transformed the food production chain in a radical way. Today, some consider Finland to have one of the best food security systems in the world, and a highly developed animal welfare system (e.g. Svenska YLE 2017). Yet there are people who – more

or less – reject the whole system of industrialised animal agriculture on ethical grounds, in favour of so-called “primitive” methods.

In this article, I have outlined the views on animals, meat and slaughter in interviews on self-sufficiency practices and a participant observation during duck slaughter (ÖTA 333). All of the people I interviewed except for one (who was vegetarian) ate meat on a regular basis, and most of them kept (or had kept in the past) some sort of farm animals on their own, ranging from smaller animals such as, for example, chickens and rabbits, to larger animals such as dairy cows and pigs. During the interviews, I quickly noticed that meat and slaughter was a topic of negotiation for the interviewees – should one keep farm animals, or not? Should one eat meat or not? Should one slaughter the animal oneself? How should one relate to slaughter? I sensed a need among the interviewees to justify their choices and activities, and to discuss the issue, something which I willingly did, since I also had previous experience of home slaughter, and had been pondering similar questions on a personal level.

In order to properly understand the subject of slaughter as a self-sufficiency practice, one needs to comprehend that home slaughter is – in the view of its practitioners – something very different from industrial slaughter, which is often perceived as unethical and an unworthy way of relating to animals. The ideal is rather to keep farm animals small-scale and to tender them oneself, from birth to death, and – ideally – also slaughter them oneself, preserving the meat and offal, as well as other animal products such as wool, down and skin. It is, however, not a given fact that one should keep farm animals even in a self-sufficiency context. When it is done, it is always driven by some ideal – it is an active choice – since the option of buying food in case of an emergency still exists (although under normal circumstances would perhaps be considered unethical).

An important difference between self-sufficiency practices today and in the past is the fact that one’s life in post-domestic modernity (Bulliet 2005) is not ultimately dependent on the crop or the animals. Hence there is always some other driving force behind the pursuit, and therefore also different types of questions arise, which need to be negotiated. Reasons for eating meat which surfaced in the examined material include that meat is ‘easy’ food which satiates many quickly (by implication, ‘good’ food). It is also viewed as morally correct to eat, for example, roosters, which in a sense are a ‘by product’ of small-scale egg production and hen keeping. Further, if a heifer dies, or a cow breaks a leg, for example, then it would be considered wastage not to use the meat and immoral since animals are viewed as having a value beyond the instrumental. A pre-requisite of eating meat is, though, that the animal lived a ‘good life’ (see further Holloway 2001, 303; Wilkie 2010, 105, 151) and that

its life was adequately ended, through on-farm slaughter. The self-sufficiency practices of the interviewees could thereby be viewed as a kind of middle way – critical of unreflective meat-eating, but also rejecting veganism. One of the interviewees did not accept any other kind of slaughter than home slaughter (and hunting), but I imagine that the other interviewees would approve also of other types of slaughter, such as, for example, in a professional small-scale mobile unit.

Different reasons for *not* keeping farm animals also appeared in the material, among other things, that it takes too much time, it is too expensive and that it requires barns, shelters, somewhere to store fodder et cetera. Consequently, one needs to balance a lot of different aspects of life, and keeping farm animals – especially more demanding animals, such as dairy cows – might not fit into the life puzzle of everyone, however attractive the idea. But the whole concept of meat eating was also questioned to some degree, partly I sensed from an ecological perspective, but most of all because of the emotional current attached to slaughter, which had led to some of the interviewees reducing their meat consumption. Home slaughter brings the animal body into direct contact with the human body, and in the moment of slaughter, also with life and death, thus activating existential questions about what it means to be a human being. Even though one thinks industrial slaughter is repelling, the act of slaughtering by oneself might also be emotionally challenging (cf. Wilkie 2010, 148–151), all though it is presented as a better alternative from an ethical point of view in the material.

In general, the approach to human animal-relations among those who are striving for self-sufficiency seems to differ significantly from the daily experiences of most people – in fact, this could be considered to be the very core of their critique of contemporary means of food production. According to this point of view, humans have become alienated from nature and nonhuman animals (cf. Holloway 2001, 297), and thereby do not any longer know what it means to live side by side with animals, and to be dependent on them (and the animals on their keeper). In post-domestic modernity, common people have very little contact, if any, with farm animals, and usually only on pre-arranged occasions, such as children’s entertainment at an outdoor market. There is also a long tradition of ascribing human qualities and ways of thinking to animals, and some types of animals – among others farm animals – tend to be strongly anthropomorphised in, for example, children’s books, thereby adding to the affectiveness of what Jamie Lorimer (2007) has termed nonhuman charisma.

The taboo surrounding slaughter which seemed to appear implicitly in the interviews might, though, actually be an expression of a greater taboo of contemporary society, namely the taboo of death. In modernity, human death has been institutionalised (Elias 1985; Sandberg 2016) and effectively removed

from the homes and everyday life of humans through, for example, hospitals and homes for the elderly. In a similar manner, the death (i.e. killing) and transformation of animals into edible products has been hidden from public sight through abattoirs, and the whole industrialised system of packaging, transporting and retailing meat and meat products (Vialles 1994; Evans & Miele 2012, 303–304; Kupsala 2019, 19, 40). This can be contrasted with the small-scale on-farm slaughter of the peasant society, or the praxis which was prevalent up until the eighteenth century, with butchers slaughtering “animals in the middle of town, sometimes right beside the stall from which the meat was sold” (Vialles 1994, 15). The place of slaughter in self-sufficiency is the garden or the backyard, which stands in sharp contrast to the “no-place” (Vialles 1994) of contemporary slaughter houses. It is in fact, though, only temporarily transformed into a kind of non-human deathscape – a liminal space or threshold between the living and the dead (Schuurman & Redmalm 2019, 33) – and reverts to being a garden once the slaughter is over, and the feathers and the blood have been wiped out by weather and wind.

In self-sufficiency practices, the bodily nature of small-scale animal farming is explicit. In fact, one could argue that the lifeworld is to a large extent constituted by the bodily relationship between humans and animals (cf. Ferencz-Flatz 2017). The animals adjust to the routines of human activity, and human beings structure their daily (and annual) schedule with the animals in mind. The human being is present, and assists if needed, when the animals are born. The human being tends to the animals with his or her body, carrying water, foddering, mucking, trimming hooves and shearing sheep. When the time has come, it is also the human body which ends the life of the animal, and its body is transformed into meat, which nourishes and enables the continued existence of the human body. The interviewees emphasised that in today’s world, where there is an abundance of meat – indeed of all kinds of consumer products – which is easily accessible at a cheap price, people do not have a proper conception of the true value of meat. For someone who is striving to be self-sufficient, however, the story of meat is much more complex. For example, a person is likely to value the result of one’s work higher, having put in a lot of time and perhaps money to raise and tend to an animal, thereby also having developed a close relationship to the animal. This might be difficult to grasp for modern people, who are used to filling their shopping baskets with pre-packaged meat, because by doing so, one also misses out on the experiences which can only emerge from the intercorporeal meeting of the human body and that of an animal.

On the day of slaughter, a sort of liminal space is created in which the normal roles are turned upside-down. The animal keeper, who up until now has

been a caretaker of the animals, feeding and caring for them, now becomes a butcher, in a kind of caring-killing paradoxical (Arluke 1994; Wilkie 2010, 148) setting. The bodily nature of the human-animal relationship in self-sufficiency farming culminates in the act of decapitation, when the human body – fully attuned to the axe – severs the head of a duck from its body. And just as the labour of working the soil changes the human body, the interrelational work of animal husbandry transforms the body of the human being, as well as the mind. The body as “an exchange of forces where I affect and am affected” (Evers 2006, 233) applies also in the context of home slaughter, and “becoming is always becoming *with*”, as Haraway (2008, 244) states. Some of the bodily changes are passing in nature, though, such as the smell of blood on one’s hands. Others are more of a long-lasting kind, such as the meat becoming (part of) the human body when consumed, affecting, nourishing and sustaining the continued life of the human being, as well as the potential change in outlook and values prompted by the experience itself. Having incorporated the axe into one’s body, implies that one has mastered the art, and thereby restored a broken tradition, but also that one has made up one’s mind – my food, my responsibility.

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AUTHOR

Andreas Backa, Lic.Phil., is doctoral student in folkloristics at Åbo Akademi University, and his dissertation examines the contemporary Nordic self-sufficiency trend.

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