

Ruth Harrison, *Animal Machines. Un'indagine sull'industria dell'allevamento intensivo*, Prefazione di Rachel Carson, A cura di Giacomo Lorenzini, Milano, FrancoAngeli, coll. "SEMI. Per coltivare le conoscenze", 2026, 286 páginas.



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Sixty-two years after its original publication in the United Kingdom, *Animal Machines* (1964) appears in Italian for the first time, in an edition curated by Giacomo Lorenzini (Professor Emeritus of Plant Pathology at the University of Pisa) for FrancoAngeli's "SEMI" series. The volume reproduces Harrison's original investigation into British factory farming of the early 1960s, organised in short, evidence-driven chapters – on broiler chickens, poultry packing stations, battery birds, veal calves and «other intensive units» – followed by a photographic reportage and by two argumentative chapters, which anticipate, with notable precision, debates that would only become mainstream decades later: the trade-off between productive efficiency and product quality, and the ethical implications on the health and quality issues externalised by intensive systems. The book closes with a chapter on «cruelty and legislation» that reads, today, as a diagnosis of the regulatory gap that the European Union (EU) would spend the following years trying, only partially, to address and resolve.

Harrison's method was mostly investigative: she inspected farms, interviewed operators and assembled a documentary record intended to reach the general public. It was precisely this public resonance that made the book operative in law, leading to the British Government's 1965 inquiry into intensive livestock husbandry, which produced the Brambell Report and, from it, the formulation of what became known as the «Five Freedoms», later revised by the Farm Animal Welfare Council: freedom from hunger and thirst, from discomfort, from pain, injury or disease, to express normal behaviour, and from fear and distress.

For scholars specialized in agricultural and food law, the principal value of this edition lies in what it allows them to trace forward. The 1976 European

Convention for the Protection of Animals kept for Farming Purposes, the related Council Directive 98/58/EC, and the legal recognition of animal sentience – first inserted in Protocol No. 33 annexed to the 1997 Treaty of Amsterdam, and later consolidated in Article 13 of TFEU – all belong to a regulatory lineage that Harrison’s book did not create by itself, but whose necessity it made impossible to deny once the underlying facts had been documented. The book is, in this sense, best read alongside the legislative history it set in motion: it is a primary source for understanding why EU animal welfare legislation developed through horizontal and species-specific regulations grounded in distinct Treaty objectives, such as the common agricultural policy, the internal market, the environmental policy and the common commercial policy.

This aspect is also where the book’s continuing relevance, and its limits as a historical document, become visible. Harrison’s central thesis, that industrial livestock farming is the product of specific political and technological choices running hand in hand with the only economically viable model, remains partially vindicated by the law it inspired. EU legislation on farm animals still oscillates between rules that treat animals as tradable “goods” and provisions that call for their moral respect and protection as sentient beings: a normative paradox that the Court of Justice of the EU is increasingly asked to examine when ruling on regulation dealing with animal protection.

Viewed against the EU «Vision for Agriculture and Food» towards 2040 and the ongoing reform of EU animal welfare legislation, *Animal Machines* emerges less as a historical document than as an unfinished agenda. Harrison already grasped, intuitively, what current debates on animal welfare labelling now try to operationalise through standards and certification schemes: that consumers cannot exercise an ethically informed choice over methods of production they cannot see. Her insistence that the industrialisation of husbandry was neither inevitable nor value-neutral further anticipates the more recent “One Health” turn in EU animal legislation. Indeed, this approach seeks, albeit with only partial success so far, to integrate animal health and welfare, public health and environmental sustainability within a comprehensive regulatory framework, instead of treating welfarism as a residual concern subordinated to food safety and market integration.

This 2026 edition owes one of its principal merits to Lorenzini’s introductory notes, which include a short section devoted to the reasons for the title, «I

perché del titolo». Lorenzini traces them back to Descartes' seventeenth-century doctrine of the *bêtes-machines*, which is based on the dualism between a thinking *res cogitans* and a merely mechanical *res extensa* that denied animals not only reason but, eventually, any natural entitlement to moral consideration at all. This Cartesian legacy underpinned the mechanistic, productivist shift in postwar British farming that Harrison went on to document: once the animal is treated as a body without interiority, it can be analysed, disassembled and optimised like any other machine, and efficiency can substitute for compassion without apparent moral cost.

Harrison's title, for Lorenzini, is therefore a deliberate oxymoron – “animal”, an emblem of life and sensitivity, welded to “machine”, an image of artifice and insensibility – in which the reduction of the living creature to a mere unit of industrial output is condensed into two words. It is on this basis that Lorenzini advances the volume's boldest claim: that *Animal Machines* was the catalyst that turned moral indignation and compassion into public policy, laying the groundwork for modern animal welfare legislation and for what he calls the modern paradigm of animal quality of life – which is why, in his account, the book is rightly regarded as the founding text of the contemporary animal welfare movement.

The following preface to the Italian edition, jointly signed by the animal scientists Erminio Trevisi (Catholic University of the Sacred Heart), Marcello Mele (University of Pisa) and Nicola Lacetera (University of Tuscia), does more than situate Harrison's findings within present-day zootechnical science; it measures the distance travelled, in six decades, in the development of livestock farming thanks to a multidisciplinary approach coalescing biological, technological, ethical, legal and economic knowledge.

Trevisi, Mele and Lacetera devote an equally substantial part of their preface to the role of citizens, a theme increasingly central to the dialogue between public authorities and civil society on Union matters related to animal welfare and treatment. They recall that Harrison herself was already alert to this dynamic, since the food industry, in her own words, «produces only what the public demands», so that consumer choices can, in principle, reshape husbandry systems around society's genuine priorities and phase out those the public will no longer tolerate. This argument is consistent with the European Court of Human Rights' recognition of animal welfare as falling within the protection of public morals: a development that has not only extended the

semantics of dignity to all sentient beings, but has in turn reflected back on human dignity itself, thereby reinforcing the cognitive and value-based recognition of the non-human world.

Beyond the photographic reportage documenting the industrial husbandry systems Harrison investigated, the volume opens with Rachel Carson's original foreword, which argues that before *Animal Machines*, the transformation of farm animals into production units had proceeded largely unseen by consumers, and that afterwards ignorance of that fact could no longer be honestly claimed.

Particularly valuable for readers of this journal is Alessandra Di Lauro's (Professor of Agricultural and Food Law at the University of Pisa) closing essay on animal welfare, which clearly depicts it as a multifaceted issue combining scientific, ethical, economic, legal and political dimensions. Di Lauro observes that the culturally constructed discontinuity in animal interiority is where the boundary between human and non-human is actually drawn and constantly renegotiated. Animal welfare, on this reading, stands as a «device of equilibrium», designed to accommodate conflicting imperatives (markets, economic activity, religious freedom, cultural practices) rather than to prioritise the value accorded to animal sentience.

This argument clarifies what is actually at stake in Harrison's book, and why its translation still matters. *Animal Machines* documented, chapter by chapter and several years in advance, precisely the reduction Di Lauro warns against: housing, transport and slaughter governed by a purely market-functional logic, with no answering normativity attached to what is owed to the animal as such. In this perspective, the fragmentation of the concept of "animal welfare" Di Lauro highlights in her postface is not merely a failure of communication between disciplines that have grown apart; it is a structural feature of a regulatory system that has consistently addressed animal welfare through classification, standardisation and market-access rules: the very gap that Harrison's reportage first exposed to a general readership, and that sixty years of «Five Freedoms», the value-laden animal welfare science and EU legislations have narrowed but not fully closed.

For the readership of this journal, the timing of the translation is opportune. Harrison's book offers such readers something historiographically rare: a first-hand account, written before the vocabulary of "animal welfare science-

and-ethics” existed in its current form, of how an industrial model of livestock production was built, justified and, eventually, contested. Its data on 1960s British farming are, inevitably, dated; but the analytical structure Harrison imposed on that data – tracing welfare outcomes back to specific choices in housing, genetics, feeding and slaughter technology – remains fully usable, and is arguably better suited to today’s regulatory debates on intensive farming than much of the polemical literature the book itself inspired.

Against a normative scenario that is still anchored in legal anthropocentrism and not in line with knowledge about the specific needs of animals and the technical progress made in livestock farming, the complexity inherent in the “animal issue” makes Harrison’s recommendations on the rethinking of the human-animal-environmental relationship even more relevant and highly topical. They resonate strongly with the line of argumentation underpinning the One Health approach, *id est* that reshaping agrifood systems requires an adaptive, multi-level model of “governance in complexity”, to borrow the European Environment Agency’s formula, capable of holding together institutional, technical and social dimensions of animal protection to share moral responsibility in farming practices and along the entire food chain.

The evidence assembled in the scholarly literature on EU animal welfare legislation – including the persistent gaps in enforcement, the absence of a harmonised legal definition of animal welfare, and the still incomplete integration of animal dignity and scientific findings on animal welfare into the EU normative framework – suggests that this Italian edition of *Animal Machines* is a timely reminder that a sentience-based and sustainable model of animal husbandry is a matter of cultural choice rather than of necessity.

As the European Parliament has succinctly but significantly put it, «Animals are living, sentient beings and their protection and correct treatment is one of the challenges for a cultured and civilised twenty-first-century Europe».

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