U.S. AG-GAG LAWS “SINISTER” SAY LEADING ACADEMICS

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Leading academics have branded United States “Ag-gag” laws, now in force in Iowa and Utah and awaiting consideration in other U.S. states, that make it a criminal offence to photograph or make a sound or video recording of an animal facility without the owner’s permission, as “sinister”.

The editors of the Journal of Animal Ethics (JAE) recently published by the University of Illinois Press Professors Andrew Linzey and Priscilla N. Cohn note that the objections to these laws seem to have been “insufficiently regarded in the preceding debates in these states, so perhaps they need to be spelled out”. They list five reasons for concern:

In the first place, the overwhelming majority of Americans eat meat and animal products. That being so, they have an obvious interest in what (or whom) they are eating, in how the animals who result in that meat were bred, raised, fed, transported, handled, treated, and slaughtered.

Second, these animal facilities, though they may be privately owned, are subject to the laws of the land (however inadequate) that apply to the treatment of farmed animals. If they continue to be hidden from public gaze, it is difficult to see how we shall know what conditions prevail, who is responsible when things go wrong (e.g., when even the minimal standards are not adhered to), and what penalties are in force.

Third, although again they may be privately owned, these “animal facilities” are the recipients of public subsidies. Every taxpayer in the United States, vegetarian or otherwise, has a right to know what is being funded in his or her name. After all, it is their money.

Fourth, the ag-gag laws prevent consumers and taxpayers not only from knowing but also from seeing and judging for themselves. In the history of moral causes, the denial of transparency invariably betokens something to hide.

Last, there is an underlying ethical issue here of some importance. What we see, or are allowed to see, affects our moral judgment. That so much of industrialized farming is, as a matter of course, hidden from view hinders full moral evaluation.

The editors conclude “We can only hope that these laws will soon be judged unconstitutional. One of the redeeming features of U.S. law is the way in which state or even federal legislation can be referred back to fundamental principles. Some may judge that it can only be a mat¬ter of time. But in the meantime, the truth about animal farming in these states will be denied to those who have a right to know.”

The JAE has been launched by a US and UK academic partnership with the goal of widening international debate about the moral status of animals, and is the result of years of collaboration between the Oxford Centre for Animal Ethics and the University of Illinois Press. It is edited by the internationally known theologian the Reverend Professor Andrew Linzey, Director of the Oxford Centre for Animal Ethics, and Professor Priscilla Cohn, Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at Penn State University and Associate Director of the Centre.

Multidisciplinary in nature and international in scope, the JAE covers theoretical and applied aspects of animal ethics. To subscribe to the Journal, please visit the Journal’s website at the University of Illinois Press.

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