

The Meat Licence Proposal: proposing 'law' as a creative medium

John O'Shea

The vast majority of individuals in the U.K. would not be comfortable killing an animal. (It is often remarked that the U.K. is a nation of 'animal-lovers'.) However, a large proportion of those same individuals choose to eat meat: herein lies an uneasy, ethical, inconsistency.

It is not the case that individuals do not have a clear knowledge or understanding of the origins of this substance, 'meat,' (in which the act of killing is implicit). Instead, I suggest, the distance between the actual process of slaughter and, an often plastic wrapped, bloodless, product is wide enough to allow individuals to temporarily 'forget' their squeamish reservations and thus proceed to consume the 'fruits' of a labour they themselves would be unwilling to take part in:

This forgetting entails a gesture of what is called fetishist disavowel: 'I know, but I don't want to know that I know, so I don't know.' I know it, but I refuse to fully assume the consequences of this knowledge, so that I can continue acting as if I don't know it. (Zizek 2008: 46)

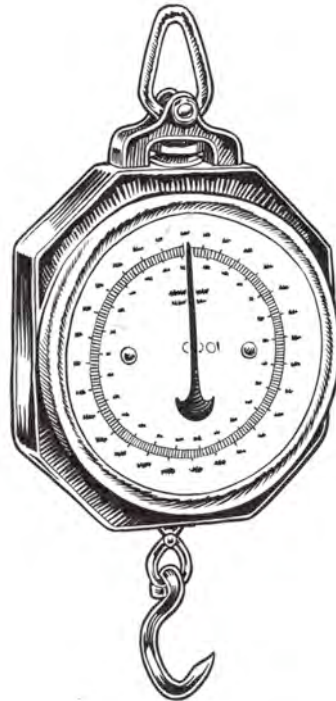
Product Process Re-call

When suspect meat products caused actual physical harm to consumers, in the case of Mad Cow Disease and British Beef in the 80's and 90's, there followed government-led culls of animals and strategic control of beef distribution. In the case described above, however, the inconsistency does not arise in the product itself, but in how the product is being received. Whilst the division of labour and industrialised slaughter have enabled an unprecedented efficiency in the delivery of meat to the table, there has arisen an undesirable gulf between product and process.

In this paper, I propose that such a problem can be remedied through a new type of legislation – a law which compels engagement at the level of the individual.

Organisation

At the end of 2007, I began developing, what I have called, 'The Meat Licence Proposal,' an organisation advocating an across-the-board consumer engagement with the act of killing, implicit in meat production and consumption.



Since its inception, the basic premise of The Meat Licence Proposal has remained practically unaltered:

People who are comfortable with eating meat, should be equally comfortable with killing animals. People who are not comfortable with killing animals should not be allowed, by law, to purchase or consume meat.

As the name suggests, The Meat Licence Proposal, starts from the perspective, that individuals should only be allowed to purchase and consume meat if they hold an appropriate licence. Licences will be obtained through each individual's direct engagement in the supervised slaughter of corresponding animals.

Being duly convinced of the Proposal's own logic, in January of 2008 I made two important decisions for the future development of The Meat Licence Proposal:

1. Personally, a long time meat-eater, I adopted the principles of the Proposal myself, vowing from that point onwards, not to eat any meat until I had made the appropriate kills. (This, I reasoned, would not take very long, and I would start with a fishing trip 'quite soon'.)
2. (Having 'tasted my own medicine') I vowed to sincerely work towards the development, formulation and enactment of a U.K. Meat Licensing Law, in whatever form it would ultimately take, setting a provisional date of January 1st, 2012 for 'going live'.

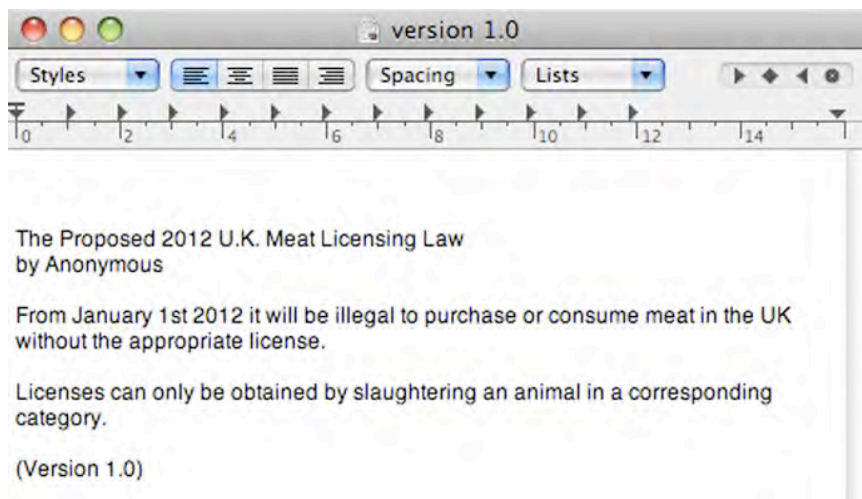
Inadvertently I had begun down two diverging streams in my attempt to realise the 'Licence'. The former, taking the 'licence' to be a kind of code, voluntarily adopted and internalised by the individual; the latter, conceiving of a 'law' which would be externally imposed, by government, making the 'Meat Licence' compulsory.

We will return to the notion of a voluntarily adopted code later in this paper but first I would like to outline my preliminary investigations in the field of lawmaking.

Law as a creative medium

Inspired by the phenomena, in both art and sport, whereby the introduction of the right restriction, can actually prove to be creatively enabling rather than being prohibitive, I was curious at this stage as to whether it might be possible to script interesting and creative laws which could subtly transform the way we relate to one and another and our environment.

In order to gauge the difficulty of the task, the most obvious and appropriate starting point was to personally attempt to write a 'Meat Licensing Law'. The result of this first attempt was quite modest:



My first attempt at writing a 'Meat Licencing Law', did however, bring aspects of the U.K. lawmaking process, into focus. I began to understand that, 'Law', in the form of legislation, is drafted by specialists within government, ratified by parliament and then imposed on citizens. Citizens could be regarded, in this equation, as 'consumers of law.'

I decided that The Meat Licence Proposal should operate on a different, more user-led model. I uploaded the first draft law to the web, accompanied it with a forum and, working with a small group of interested collaborators, began facilitating a public discussion about what form a 'Meat Licensing Law' might take. This notion, of treating citizens as co-developers of law, rather than end-users (or consumers) has a clear parity with, open-source software development models as described by Eric S. Raymond in 'The Cathedral and the Bazaar':

6. TREATING YOUR USERS AS CO-DEVELOPERS IS YOUR LEAST-HASSLE ROUTE TO RAPID CODE IMPROVEMENT AND EFFECTIVE DEBUGGING. (Raymond 2001: 27)

Since then, The Meat Licence Proposal website has received numerous contributions in the form of forum posts, blog articles, pod-casts, illustrations and video work building a complex meta-architecture of potential forms for the 'Licence'. The Meat Licence Proposal, as an organisation has also facilitated debate in several 'real-world' public forums and hosted dinners, public meetings and talks.

From this very albeit brief experience, I believe that the arrival of unprecedented communications technology and highly networked non-geographic communities, will make direct, citizen-enacted, laws a distinct possibility for the U.K. in the very near future.

The logistical argument

One argument often made against The Meat Licence Proposal is that, on logistical grounds, it simply will not happen: too much change in infrastructure, too much change in behaviour and too much cost to the taxpayer, or so the argument goes. This objection is heartening to hear for two reasons:

1. Any logistical argument allows for The Meat Licence Proposal in principle.
2. A simple examination of bureaucratic procedures already in place, both in government and the private sector, quickly demonstrate that, with the right economic motivations, all kinds of seemingly unlikely operations can be carried out.

Below is a sketch proposing one possible way the 'Licencing' procedure could occur, by combining two existing elements of infrastructure already in place in the U.K:

(A). Vehicle M.O.T. Testing; a government scheme which occurs at private garages all over the country. Vehicle owners are required annually to go through this process in their own time and at personal expense.

(B). Halal Slaughter; the ritual act of killing can only be performed by a Muslim (although this is not a requirement at any of the other stages of animal processing.)

The kill must be performed in a single swipe by a razor sharp knife.

A theoretical sketch

David is 16 years old. He has considered his options and has decided that he would like to get his Meat Licence. David rings up his local slaughterhouse and arranges an appointment for Wednesday afternoon (when he is not at college.) On Wednesday, David arrives at 1.30pm and is asked to change into appropriate over-clothing (supplied) and spend 45 minutes going through a slaughterhouse induction along with fifteen other candidates. (It finishes with a short health and safety test.) After a short break, all of the candidates

return to the classroom for a 45 minute coaching session on the correct slashing action to ensure the animal will be killed humanely. (Two candidates leave at this stage.) Another short break and then it's down to the animal processing lanes and, at the very end, the supervised slaughter bay. David queues up and, when his turn arrives, an animal is brought to the bay for dispatch. Job done, David then gets changed and goes home. His Meat Licence is in the post.

Full circle

The Creative Commons movement allows individuals to determine what restrictions are placed on their intellectual property when it is published to the net, by downloading one of several, regularly updated, user-friendly licences. An equivalent to this approach, allowing individuals to subscribe to and advocate particular ethical frameworks, could signal the right direction for building grassroots support for the Meat Licence concept.

If we can start to understand law as a technology and develop appropriate interfaces for citizen interaction and intervention then, perhaps, we can narrow the current gulf between citizen and lawmaker.

Human animal hierarchy

It is important to recognise that The Meat Licence Proposal does not set out to disturb humankind's assumed dominion over beasts. Also it is explicitly *not* a pro-vegetarian organisation – it is an organisation which aims to enable all citizens to engage fully in the act of killing - implicit in meat production - and to facilitate those individuals wishing to eat meat, in the supervised slaughter of appropriate animals. What we must do is bring nonhuman animals within our sphere of moral concern. (Singer 1995: 20)

Since individuals will be required to consider their own relation to the killing of animals, long before they are allowed to consume meat, the 'Meat Licence', in whatever form it takes, creates a new threshold in terms of consuming meat. It is not so much that a new ethical boundary is ascribed (people have always been able to decide whether they want to eat meat or not), but, that the focus of ethical enquiry is shifted from the point-of-sale and dinner table to the slaughterhouse.'Post-Meat

Licence' we would no longer consider a demographic of 'meat-eaters or vegetarians' but 'killers or non-killers.'

References

Raymond, Eric B. *The Cathedral and the Bazaar*. United States: O'Reilly, 2001. Print.

Singer, Peter. *Animal Liberation*. Libri, 1995. Print.

Zizek, Slavoj. *Violence*. Great Britain: Profile Books, 2008. Print.