

Racing animals: reflections on the racehorse market and its impacts on interspecies relationships

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Abstract:

This study examines the complex relationship between humans and horses in the context of the prestigious sport of turf racing with its captivating history and strong market appeal. Based on ethnographic research conducted among turf racing bettors and enthusiasts, the article explores the diverse modes of production involved, encompassing the sport's material and symbolic dimensions. It investigates the meanings and uses of horses in this specialized market, tailored for an increasingly discerning public fascinated by the spectacle. By highlighting the unique attributes and capabilities of these equines, the study sheds light on the interplay between humans and horses, enriching our understanding of the multifaceted dynamics underlying the horse racing phenomenon. The economic significance of racehorses as commodities and investments is also emphasized, foregrounding the uncertainty and chance inherent to the industry. This control over nature is reflected in the economic and symbolic value attributed to the animals, shaping the structured market behind the racing spectacle.

Keywords: Horse Racing; Human–Horse Relationship; Turf Market; Racehorse Production; Symbolic Value.

Animais de corrida: reflexões sobre o mercado de cavalos de turfe e seus impactos nas relações interespecíficas

Resumo:

Este estudo examina a complexa relação entre humanos e cavalos no contexto do prestigiado esporte do turfe, com sua história cativante e forte apelo de mercado. Com base em pesquisa etnográfica realizada entre apostadores e entusiastas do turfe, o artigo explora os diversos modos de produção envolvidos, abrangendo as dimensões materiais e simbólicas do esporte. Investiga os significados e usos dos cavalos neste mercado especializado, adaptado para um público cada vez mais exigente e fascinado pelo espetáculo. Ao destacar os atributos e capacidades únicos desses equinos, o estudo lança luz sobre a interação entre humanos e cavalos, enriquecendo nossa compreensão das dinâmicas multifacetadas que sustentam o fenômeno das corridas de cavalos. A importância econômica dos cavalos de corrida como mercadorias e investimentos também é enfatizada, evidenciando a incerteza e o acaso inerentes à indústria. Este controle sobre a natureza reflete-se no valor econômico e simbólico atribuído aos animais, moldando o mercado estruturado por trás do espetáculo das corridas.

Palavras-chave: corridas de cavalos; relação humano-cavalo; mercado do turfe; produção de cavalos de corrida; valor simbólico.

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INTRODUCTION

Horse racing, also known as turf racing, falls within the realm of practice, apprehended as a *sui generis* sporting activity that requires an immanent relationship between humans and horses for its realization. Appearing in Brazil in the early nineteenth century, it was one of the first sporting activities¹ to be established in the city of Rio de Janeiro, then the national capital. This was a pioneering practice that stood out for its organization of competition calendars, the formation of clubs, the development of specialized technical expertise and its popular appeal, which generated a significant market around the sport. Its popularity was further enhanced by its close association with gambling, which definitively marked the emergence of turf racing within the recreational sports market.² Based on an ethnographic study conducted with bettors, breeders, trainers, and horse racing enthusiasts³ (Labronici 2017), the aim here is to present some of the elements that underlie and shape the ways in which animals are signified for the racehorse market, exploring a complex context in which industry, gambling, power and money impose themselves but do not eliminate a strong, rich and everyday interspecies relationship.

From the outset, it is important to highlight that perceptions regarding the significance of horses, both at racing events and in the market for breeding and training animals for the betting

1 Turf racing had a decisive influence on the development of other sports, utilizing a club structure, competition-based organization and even the adoption of its own language. Sporting activity is understood as an end in itself, an activity “for nothing,” with no objectives beyond its own practices. However, historian Victor Melo (2001, 2009: 15) provides a definition of the concept of sport that is worth noting: “(...) understood as a relatively autonomous field, with a specific internal logic that is irreducible to explanations of an economic and social nature. (...) but rather, taking into account that a large part of its understanding lies in its internal logic and the cultural context in which it is embedded.” Before being conceived as a strategy for bodily development and the valorization of physical exercise, sport, as a cultural manifestation, was also conceived as a strategy for educational control of the new working classes, a more “appropriate” substitute for popular diversions (Melo 2007: 68–70).

2 For a historical perspective, see the works of Carvalho (1998a; 1998b) and Melo (2001, 2007, 2009).

3 This text is based on reflections that have been developed in my postdoctoral research with the support of the Fundação Carlos Chagas Filho de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (FAPERJ) and the Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas (CONICET) in Argentina.

industry, are often closely shared by those directly involved in staging races and those more distant from the process. In the production of a racehorse, a series of human and non-human actors are associated with different “sociotechnical networks” (Callon 1989, 2006a, 2006b; Callon & Latour 1991, Latour 2000) that involve agents sharing specific techniques for animal reproduction, breeding, training, care, purchase and sale, ultimately transforming the horse into a privileged commodity of circulation. The horse is thus transferred through different points of the production chain according to its maturation period and the career trajectory planned for each animal. While some actors may be concentrated at separate points of this chain, others are involved throughout almost its entirety. Here, in the context of producing animals for the horseracing market, the notion of nature is not considered a universal condition (or a holistic category) with cultural discontinuities and cannot generally be understood as an external ontological domain distinct from the human world (Descola 1986). Consequently, the aim here is to explore, through ethnographic research with bettors and enthusiasts of turf racing, some of the modes of production (both material and symbolic), meanings and uses of these equines in the consolidation of a market oriented towards a progressively specialized audience that appreciates the spectacle.

In the spectacle of horse racing, “turf culture” consists not only of horses but also of individuals immersed in practices related to race production, such as jockeys, trainers, breeders, grooms and veterinarians, as well as enthusiasts, spectators, and bettors, among others. Everyone is focused to some degree on the production of turf racing as a spectacle. Consequently, there are various ways to refer to the public in horse racing: punters (*jogadores*), bettors, enthusiasts, turfists, connoisseurs (*catedráticos*),⁴ racegoers (*careiristas*), and so on, all of which express the idea of someone who deeply understands the various aspects and nuances of the sport, capable of navigating its diverse interfaces with ease and mastery. Furthermore, these individuals are governed by rules and codes of conduct that encompass specific etiquettes in competition with their peers (or rivals) in the pursuit of winning. Therefore, I use the term “turfist” in a generic sense to encompass all these ranges of interactions, involvements, affinities, preferences and unique perspectives concerning turf racing, both within and outside

4 The attribution of *catedrático* (connoisseur) is ambiguous: it can be a genuine compliment or ironic. The best depiction of the *catedrático*, in all its breadth and ambiguity, is provided by the chronicler Luís Edmundo (1957: 530–531). “(...) the *catedrático*, a curious type in the national horseracing scene, is usually a public worker (...) This man, who considers himself a formidable expert in racing matters, when taking a break at his office (as an excellent civil servant, letting his beard grow), if he is not musing, then he is reading everything available about the upcoming race and divulged in the city’s newspapers. As a result, he knows all the comments and gossip circulating about the upcoming race. The man knows extraordinary things: the health of the horse that will run, the physical stamina of its jockey, the moral capacity of its owner, which is very important, the condition of the track, the truth about comparisons made in the pre-dawn twilight and that die in the secret of shadows, shadows that do not write sports sections in the newspapers... Furthermore, he can provide details on the pedigree, weight or stud farm of any horse registered at the city racetracks, as well as its number of victories, able to cite the names of the jockeys who rode it and the time it took to cross the racing line, and what the betting pools yielded... An astonishing feat! However, the *catedrático* — like the Oracle from Delphi, knowing everything, even the name of the horse that will win — when he gambles, is plagued by a fatal destiny: he always loses! Yet, he continues to become even more of a *catedrático*.”

the production of the sporting spectacle, which is also considered a male or masculinizing identity category (Velasquez 2015: 20).⁵ Although, as highlighted by Miriam Adelman and Fernanda Moraes (2008), there has been a growing female presence in the sport, with some women successfully pursuing careers as veterinarians and trainers, they emphasize that the path to their professional success remains challenging and filled with obstacles due to the predominantly masculinized nature of the turf racing environment.

Thus, whether they are directly involved in the race proceedings through their daily work in the production of the spectacle (including stable hands, jockeys, trainers, breeders), or acting as direct or indirect intermediaries (horse owners, stud farms, veterinary professionals, and other staff), or seeking leisure and entertainment (such as club members, spectators and regular bettors), the races held at the Jockey Club Brasileiro (JCB) racecourse become a pursuit of pleasure, excitement and adventure for diverse groups in distinct ways (Dunning & Elias 1992). This distinction is less a consequence than a cause of the available forms of socializing with horseracing. The leisure areas reserved for club members remain restricted to the general public, while the racecourse is open for both members and non-members to watch and place bets on the horse races. The VIP boxes, situated at the top of the stands with the best view of the track, continue to be restricted to club members, horse owners, and members and families of the local elite. Some of the tables are reserved and bear family names on golden plaques, marking a distinct territoriality from the occasional public. Consequently, the hierarchical structure still attempts to reflect the remnants of its golden years when Rio de Janeiro's high society gathered to "see and be seen."⁶ Today, however, there are frequent discourses advocating for the expansion and "democratization" of the sport. In the pursuit of new standards, the JCB has sought to reformulate its image based on more "democratic" and "egalitarian" values. This was made explicit by José Carlos Fragoso Rodrigues, president of the Jockey Club in 1998, when he declared:

The aura of the "sport of kings" is, in fact, a stigma that has marked horse racing as an activity for nobles or magnates since its inception in the eighteenth century. However, this couldn't be further from the truth. Horse racing, at the dawn of the new millennium, is a powerful

5 The spaces of horse racing — both racetracks and betting houses — are established as localities through the construction of a *male sociability* in places known as "men's houses" (Guedes 1997). These constitute a fundamental element of the lives of workers, connecting family, work and leisure, places where the presence of women is constantly limited. The separation of this physical and symbolic terrain reinforces the values and norms of this male sociability.

6 Historian Felipe Magalhães (2011: 46) argues that horse racing was established on the basis of values and forms of sociability originating from the upper echelons of society. "Horse racing, whether as a sport or entertainment, was created for wealthy families, for their enjoyment. Bilac, in one of his chronicles, argued that the main spectacle of the racetracks did not take place on the tracks with the horses, but rather in the grandstands where people attended to see and be seen." However, this does not mean that the working classes did not actively participate in horse racing. From the beginning, this segment of society was present as fans, bettors and direct participants in the events. Tram lines were redirected and renamed to ensure the population's easy access to horseracing events. Despite constant attempts at control, social division and the imposition of values by the elites and club officials, such influences, historian Victor Melo (2001, 2009) argues, were not passively absorbed by the working classes. While some of the elite's values were incorporated by them, the club officials also had to adapt to certain ideas. As subordinate as working class culture may have been, it was not constructed solely based on this subordination.

entertainment industry that directly creates jobs and taxes, and stimulates a vast network of economic activities that converge around it. Furthermore, contrary to the prevailing impression, horse racing is an extremely democratic universe where the humble and the powerful, the rich and the poor, coexist side by side, day by day. (Quoted in Carvalho 1998a: 4)

However, within the chain through which the horse-commodity passes, not all positions and roles are similar or regarded with the same symbolic, hierarchical, economic and social value. Hierarchical relationships in horse racing point to an intersection of meanings relating to activities involving horses that express the sense of professionalization and leisure, or the sense of professionalization intertwined with leisure (Adelman 2016). I start out, therefore, from the premise that spaces dedicated to sports and entertainment need to be understood in terms of power relations and competition, where profound meanings about human beings and the animals involved are constructed.

ANIMAL PURITY AND HUMAN CORRUPTION

The production of animals for a particular market is usually consolidated by specific rules developed to improve the quality of a species, which, in turn, determine the value of its networks (Leal 2014). In the chain that supports and consolidates the horse production market, its values are directly linked to the nature of the sport. When dealing with horse racing, it is necessary to understand the rules and their articulation with the social norms and roles of each actor established within the sport, as it is through the latter that arenas of sociability are produced and reproduced, expressing values, assessments, and generating tensions between ideas of order and possibilities. In both the animal production market and the betting industry, the notion of “risk” appears as an inherent part of their consolidation. Risk is associated with a horse’s favorable performance in horse racing, from the breeding process to the purchase of a yearling (at the Tattersall auction),⁷ breeding, training and even its performance in races. It is a structural and integral part of the “nature”⁸ of the sport, driven by uncertainties throughout the entire chain, from conception to the finish line.

In horse racing, the relationship between “nature and culture” unfolds into poles of complementary opposition and can be viewed from various perspectives, such as animal/human, genetics/technique, pedigree/performance, and wild/domesticated, among many others. On

7 Richard Tattersall was an English jockey who, in 1780, founded an auctioneer company in Hyde Park, London, the first establishment exclusively dedicated to the sale of horses for turf racing. His name became a generic term to designate locations dedicated to horse auctions. In Rio de Janeiro, the Tattersall at the Gávea racecourse is managed by the Association of Racehorse Owners and Breeders of Rio de Janeiro (APCCC) where it hosts the city’s main auctions (see Carvalho 1998a: 24; 1998b).

8 According to Sergio Barcellos (2002: 43), the uncertainties associated with horse race betting are central to its emotional appeal: “The second conclusion relates to the very nature of the game. And here, the thesis that has been most favored is to present turf betting as an exciting risk taken through living beings, with ever volatile temperaments and moods, rather than measuring chances against a machine or simply adhering helplessly to the law of probabilities, as is the case with lotteries.”

the racetracks, the assemblage (Deleuze and Guattari 2008: 18) of horse and jockey⁹ allows us to understand the production of races through hybrid beings (Latour 2005), which form the minimal real unit that produces the statements of turf racing. Evaluating a race is understood here as the possibility of choosing from a set of competitors in a race, constituted by this hybrid assemblage of humans and non-humans. On average, between six and fifteen competitors participate in each race and their evaluation is based on the observation of their salient traits, their history and their network of relationships: the jockey, the horse, its breeders and trainers, the track distance, the surface type (dirt or turf), the medications used, and a series of other factors that are considered relevant and may have some influence and impact on the outcome. Hence, there is a combination of actions and techniques performed by different actors (human and non-human) that are interconnected in networks of relationships to produce a race. In other words, the production of a race is also understood through the relationship between human and non-human entities, taking into account the different agencies, etiquettes, techniques and ethics to achieve the expected outcome of a competitive and winning racehorse.

Before addressing this issue, it is important to note that the breed used in horse racing is a specific type. Known as the Thoroughbred,¹⁰ it is understood here as a “polysemic category” (Cassidy 2002), not entirely animal or human, object or subject, purely artificial nor wholly natural. As Tim Ingold (1994) points out, such an understanding places animals at the center of certain Western perspectives in defining the very concept of humanity. “Man” and “animal” become associations laden with ambiguities, burdened by emotional and intellectual prejudices. Based on this understanding, therefore, horse can be seen as a practice that serves a variety of purposes and acquires different meanings for those involved in the sport. In the case of Thoroughbred horses, they are immersed in what Donna Landry (2020) identified as a paradox of equine purity. A distinct breed can be a fiction, always in tension with the mestizo and the hybrid, but it is a fiction whose validity is embodied in the conformation and abilities of the horses themselves. In the case of Thoroughbreds, this breed gained popularity on the global stage during the nineteenth century alongside the international rise of the political and commercial dominance of the British Empire. This breed of English horses evolved from imports from the Middle East between 1650 and 1750, involving more than 200 stallions and mares.

Considering the wide range of perspectives that express the meanings that humans and animals acquire in horse racing, the issue of conflict, such as the inherent possibility of cheating, is a prominent theme among turfists and sets the actions of both humans and animals in the sport within a broader framework. Cheating in horse racing is associated with the idea that some actor may interfere, outside the ethical boundaries of the turf, with the competition

9 The mythological figure of the “Centaur” is used by some authors to highlight an inseparable view of man and horse in which the result of this union is greater than the sum of its parts (see Velasquez 2015).

10 The English term Thoroughbred is a translation of the Arabic *kebailan* or the Ottoman Turkish *kuheyilan*, meaning “pure throughout” (quoted in Landry 2020). In Portuguese, the breed is called *Puro Sangue Inglês*, “English Pure Blood,” a direct correlation to the country in which the practice originated.

and the outcome of a race. Deviation from normality or predictability in terms of possible results is a constant concern in turf races. Even when not directly linked to the behind-the-scenes dimensions of the sport, there often lingers in the imagination of turfists the notion that pernicious actions could be implemented to disrupt or secure undeserved victories. To illustrate this point, I provide an example from the testimony of turfist Ivan, who commented:

There was a whole day of meetings that went wrong. The jockeys got together to agree a finishing order that just wouldn't normally happen. That underdog horse, the one nobody expected to win, they would ensure it came first. The others would hold back [go slower than they should] to let it pass in front. There were five jockeys and one apprentice involved in the scheme. They would race in almost every event that day and they teamed up so that the most unlikely outcomes would occur to benefit themselves. One horse would win one race, another horse another, and so on. And they were betting on it, because jockeys, trainers, owners, all of them bet as well. So, on that day, the results were becoming stranger and stranger. It was like if the underdog team beat Barcelona, it just doesn't happen, it's highly unlikely. So, the guys [race organizers] went and put pressure on the jockeys, and in the end, the apprentice spilled the beans. They were manipulating the races to make a profit from the bets at the end of the day and share the winnings among themselves. Then everyone got suspended, even the young guy [apprentice] who ended up confessing. These things happen, you can't let your guard down, otherwise, you get cheated from all sides. (Labronici 2017: 205)

When results deviate significantly from what is expected based on the classification processes or when they are perceived as “strange” or “unusual,” accusations of manipulation arise. Allegations of “cheating” can be made at various moments, whether substantiated or not. A simple defeat is enough for some punters to make such a claim, albeit without any expectation that something will be done about it. Despite a series of control processes established by the Brazilian Jockey Club, such as the implementation of judges and a review committee to evaluate the races, many bettors believe that this merely reduces the incentive for cheating, which is still constantly taking place in plain sight of everyone.

Cheating, as expressed in the words of the one bettor, Ivan, often falls on the status of jockeys and their active participation in the unfolding of a race. They are the actors holding the reins as they compete with their opponents. However, their role within the broader network of relations in horse racing is generally subordinated. Jockeys and apprentices do not have an active voice in the sport; they are either hired as employees of a stud farm or randomly selected by the Jockey Club administration for each race. On this topic, historian Victor Melo (2001: 119–122) also argues that historically jockeys were not considered the true winners, unlike the horses and owners. Furthermore, only a minority of jockeys were actively involved in horse racing as they were bound by the structure of the clubs, conditioned by the demands of their bosses, pressured by the demand for results, and even illusorily incorporated certain elements of the elite. The jockey was the most passive part of horse racing, lacking the freedom to protest in the same way as the general public. Such issues persist in the sport, although some Brazilian jockeys have gained sufficient prestige to race in the United States,

Argentina¹¹ and even Dubai. The higher status given to horses is still a topic of discussion, especially when a group of turfists seek to place a bet. There is still a clear preference for the animal over its rider.

However, it is not only jockeys who are accused of cheating. Suspicions of attempts to manipulate race results extend throughout the network of relations traversed by the horse, also raising suspicions about the roles of breeders, owners and, most importantly, trainers. Sensitivity, dedication, respect and responsibility are expected from the trainer in preparing a horse. They are also responsible for the health and well-being of the animal. After training is completed, a Thoroughbred is sent to the racetrack stables where the young horse receives final training and adapts to the demands of track competition. It is kept in a stable under the responsibility of a trainer, who is equipped with the necessary physical infrastructure and supporting personnel such as blacksmiths, grooms, veterinarians and feed suppliers. However, the trainer's prestige will come under scrutiny if their conduct shows signs of being permissive or inadequate. One issue widely cited among turfists is the practice of trainers being responsible for two or more horses in the same race. The expectation is that they will use strategies that deliberately prioritize one of the competitors, causing one of them to intentionally lose in favor of the other. They may also make one of their horses run solely to disrupt the other competitors, clearing the path for their favored horse. This type of behavior is rarely punished due to the difficulty of proving it. Nevertheless, persistent suspicions arise when a trainer has multiple entries in a race. Allegations of "cheating" and "trickery" intensify rivalries within the racecourse environment.

Just as in other markets of animal production and care (Gaspar 2018), in horse racing there is an increasing engagement with veterinary services, products, technologies and knowledge, part of a constant and attentive search for signs in the animal's body and behavior that might indicate deviation from its "normal" health patterns. In addition to the behavior and actions of competitors on the track, a highly effective form of cheating occurs through the medium of the substances administered to the animals. Doping, as the practice is called, involves the manipulation of drugs, hormones and substances that enhance the animal's performance and are considered harmful or contrary to the spirit of competition.¹² In the case of horse racing, there are substances with therapeutic effects that are tolerated and controlled (through screening with set limits), as well as strictly prohibited substances, which are defined by the International Federation of Horseracing Authorities (IFHA), of which Brazil is a signatory.

11 For example, jockey Ricardinho, who achieved the milestone of 13,000 victories, breaking the world record in 2019, began his career at the Stable Village of the Brazilian Jockey Club in the Gávea neighborhood in the city of Rio de Janeiro and is currently based in Buenos Aires, Argentina (See: "Turfe: jóquei Jorge Ricardo atinge a marca de 13 mil vitórias na carreira" (2020).

12 The Jockey Club provides trainers with a list of ten substances whose limits should not be exceeded (checked through screening). These substances are 1 — Arsenic, 2 — Boldenone, 3 — Carbon Dioxide, 4 — Dimethyl Sulfoxide, 5 — Estradiol in males, 6 — Hydrocortisone, 7 — Methoxytyramine, 8 — Salicylic Acid, 9 — Testosterone, and 10 — Theobromine. See "Doping – a verdade é uma só" (2013).

Except for substances listed in the control table, no other substance has tolerable limits. If the presence of a prohibited substance is confirmed in the sample at any level, therefore, it is considered doping. To verify this, tests are conducted on the first and second place finishers after each race to check for their use, and there may be a random selection of a third competitor for testing. If the indicated tolerance limit is exceeded, the substance is classified as doping. Despite constant monitoring, however, these measures do not prevent trainers from exceeding controlled dosages or administering substances outside the established rules. The penalty for administering substances that alter the horse's performance, whether to enhance or diminish it, falls on the trainer, who is the primary suspect in cases of animal doping. If caught doping, trainers may be suspended or even expelled from the sport.¹³

The same issue of suspicion arises with the weighing process. Due to the importance placed on weight for victory or defeat in a competition, horses, jockeys and riding equipment are all weighed openly and under careful monitoring conditions before and after each race. This public weighing is undertaken to prevent any manipulations or alterations beyond the previously established limits. Races with added weights (handicaps) are particularly scrutinized to ensure that none of these weights has been discarded during the race to give a specific competitor an advantage. If there is a discrepancy between the initial and final weighing, the competitor may be disqualified and placed last in the race. On this issue, suspicions may also affect the reputation of trainers perceived to be colluding with jockeys and owners, showing that despite constant attempts to produce “clean” races, the latent potential to gain advantages among competitors is always present. Nonetheless, this constant pursuit of cheating and the various ways of bending the rules to win do not have a devastating effect on the reputation of horse racing as a whole.¹⁴ In this regard, anthropologist Rafael Velasquez (2015), in his research on the sport, writes:

There are more than symbolic aspects to racehorses. These equines represent the profound and absorbing essence of horse racing. As mentioned above, there is an atmosphere of suspicion surrounding the individuals that permeates the racecourse, where everyone is seen as cunning [*malandro*]. This is natural, considering that it is a game in which the total bets — the prize — are divided among the winning bettors. However, it is the horses themselves who are responsible for mitigating these suspicions, as they are the essence that sets this activity apart (Velasquez 2015: 41).

There exists the idea of a counterbalance in the competition on the part of the animal, perceived as inherently indifferent to the fact of winning or losing a race. Although the material and immaterial gains derived from competition may contribute to improvements or

13 These rules are available in the National Racing Code (NRC) prepared by the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Food Supply, the responsible authority. See Brazil (2012).

14 Victor Melo (2001) highlights the role of *tribofes* in the old racecourses of Rio de Janeiro in attempts to evade the established rules, a practice considered the main sources of conflicts at the time.

even the prolongation of a horse's material life (as will be explored later), the general understanding among turfists is that horses are not beings capable of absorbing this causal logic. Regardless of how victorious a horse may be, it is still perceived as a horse and not endowed with mechanisms that would allow it to transcend its own nature, which, for a turfist, is a "racing nature."¹⁵ Thus, there is a widespread notion of the relationship between the animality of horses and the humanity of those who produce a race, which is nullified when observed through the lens of suspicion of cheating, with an eternal distrust of humans and a belief in the purity of animals as (supposedly) incorruptible entities.

As I remarked earlier, the spectacle of a turf race can be understood through the contrast between humanity and nature. Despite the constant suspicion of cheating, the imaginary of turf racing coexists with a relationship of honorable competition in which competitors abide by the rules and achieve victory without the need for subterfuge. Although such manipulative maneuvers exist, many participants share the belief that it is not worth winning at any cost and a "clean" victory holds a symbolic and moral value superior to the material prize received. The ethics of the actors encompass a range of meanings, from the ethical and "humane" way of breeding, caring for and training an animal to the appropriate and correct way of racing and betting.

In this context, it is also worth highlighting some personifying characteristics attributed to horses by certain turf enthusiasts known as "purists" who do not see the animals merely as inert beings entirely susceptible to manipulation by humans, but as beings endowed with some degree of agency. Animal agency is taken into account in the production of a horse and, especially, in its performance on the track. This agency is manifested when horses assume individual responsibilities, dispositions and character traits. Consequently, the use of specific equipment and tools becomes necessary to diminish these effects and prevent the animal's agency from escaping human control completely, including the use of a shadow roll and blinkers, which limit the horse's range of attention. The shadow roll is a foam placed over the horse's nose and aims to reduce distractions in horses that tend to run with their heads down, looking directly at the ground, and become easily startled by water puddles, leaves and so on. Similarly, blinkers are used to prevent the horse from being startled by other competitors when running side by side and to avoid biting jockeys or other horses during a race. A rosette and spurs are employed for horses that have difficulty running in a straight line or navigating turns. Finally, there is the practice of shoeing, specifying the type of horseshoe used, which can be made of aluminum, rubber or iron. Until the 2013/2014 season, horses were allowed to run unshod in turf races, which generally improved their performance, but it could also compromise the horse's hooves. Since 2015, however, this practice has no longer been permitted. According to Sérgio Barcellos (2002: 109–111), some of these aids are considered by purists as an *aparato infame*, a "shameful contraption," attributing their use to "character

15 See Velasquez (2015).

flaws” in the animal. Biting competitors, being unable to run in a straight line, being skittish and easily frightened are not traits of a natural-born champion. For purists, these techniques reflect the denial of an incorruptible, original past of the sport, which has been undone by constant demands for control. Nevertheless, the use of such control mechanisms functions as “temperament stabilizers” by creating an illusion of protection and security for younger animals. Some argue that without the implementation of these devices, some of these animals might never have had the opportunity to develop a career in the sport.

A DOMESTICATED MARKET

In horse racing, the notion of ownership can be divided into three categories: individual owners, referring to a single individual; a *stud*, which is a partnership consisting of two or more partners who collectively own the horse; or a *haras*, which refers to the establishment that bred the horse and retains ownership rights. These owners, whether individuals or partners of a stud farm, play crucial roles at various important stages in the life of a horse and enjoy a distinguished prestige within the turf community due to the high costs involved in breeding and maintaining the animals, the necessary knowledge of medical/veterinary requirements, and the training and riding techniques employed to transform an ordinary animal into a champion on the racetrack. They are seen to possess a more comprehensive understanding of various aspects of a horse’s life and, as such, are considered to have expertise that contributes to negotiations with other actors (like trainers, breeders and jockeys) in assessing the horse’s suitability for participation in a race. However, the attribution of the concept of ownership to a racehorse expands the lexicon of meanings for its owners. These notions may range from affection and companionship to resources and investments, with varying degrees of familiarity depending on the specific context in which they are employed.

I take as an example “Seu Pereira,” one of my interlocutors at the betting houses. He owned a mare that was already in the twilight of her career but still participated in regular events. Despite this, he would frequently emphasize the quality of his horse, often creating a direct association between the prized traits of the animal and his own. When his horse won, not only did he win the competition prize, he also stood out among the other turfists. His horse’s victory would be followed by congratulations from others who remarked on the actions he had taken that allowed the horse to acquire the qualities required to win a race. On the other hand, when the mare lost a race, justifications were also given through association: “It’s because she’s getting old, poor thing, just like her owner, she can’t handle it anymore,” he would often comment. In the relationship established between some owners and their horses, there is a notion of “fractality” (Wagner 1991), where it is not a question of one unit in relation to a whole, but rather an entity whose relationships are fully implicated.

Even though he was a horse owner, “Seu Pereira” was also a frequent bettor and understood the complementary nature of the gaming industry associated with horse racing as a necessary

appendage that “added more flavor to the races.” When his mare entered a race, there were many instances where he would place bets on rival horses regardless of their chances of winning. When questioned about this approach, his explanations revolved around recognizing the limitations of his own horse in a particular race, while in other cases he would emphasize a situation where he would win at any cost. If his mare emerged victorious or finished among the prize positions, he would receive the race prize; if his mare lost, he would increase his chances of avoiding leaving empty-handed, even at the expense of his horse’s defeat. However, the relationships between owners and their animals are not limited solely to the realm of victory or defeat on the racetrack; they can occasionally extend to the familial sphere. For example, “Seu Pereira” would claim that his children and wife, despite not sharing the same enthusiasm for horse racing, appreciated the animal as “almost part of the family.” This thought-provoking reflection on the animal’s value and its perceived kinship with its owners is rooted in the “assumption of moral equality — that animals are also people” (Segata 2012: 178).

On the other hand, the care for the animal, the costs of its upkeep, the high expenditure on supplies, the salaries of specialized professionals, facilities, transportation, high fees and other financial outlays make the economic sphere a central theme when discussing racehorses. As “Seu Pereira” observed, “I spend over two thousand reais just on the animal’s food. This isn’t a stray dog that eats anything, let alone a toy that can be treated however you want; this is an investment.” The expenses associated with the animal add to its value, transforming it into an asset that appreciates as it achieves positive performances on the racetrack. The animal’s economic and symbolic value are directly linked, as the more victories and the greater the significance of the races won, the more its prestige among turfists increases. Consequently, despite the familial perception, “Seu Pereira’s” mare was also understood within the framework of an “investment,” guided by notions and regulations established within the traditional market. As sociologist Viviana Zelizer (2011a) has demonstrated, the separation between “market relationships” and “intimate relationships” tends to shift in distance through negotiation processes rather than any insurmountable rupture. Thus, in the hands of an aspiring winner, the ownership of a horse, even under the label of “pet,” is constantly negotiated based on its performance. If the animal ceases to be “economically profitable,” meaning when its expenses surpass its earnings or when its continued upkeep no longer makes sense, such as owning an animal with little prestige, many owners put their horses for sale on the horse market.

The way this market operates can be exemplified by the case of the horse Bal a Bali, nicknamed by the specialized press as “the black prince.” At the time, its majority owner was a stud farm called Santa Maria de Araras, located in Rio Grande do Sul, a southern Brazilian state, and considered by many bettors as one of the best horse-breeding Stud Farm in the country. Bal a Bali achieved victory in the three biggest prize races of the 2013/2014¹⁶

16 The horse racing seasons follow the “horse racing year,” which runs from July 1st to June 30th, for statistical purposes, as stated in the Considerations of the National Code of Racing (CNC).

season, becoming the 12th triple crown winner,¹⁷ with a record on the grass track. To become a triple crown winner, a competitor must win the 1000 m, 1600 m (approximately one mile), and 2400 m (one and a half miles) race events in the Grande Prêmio Brasil. These races are the most challenging, featuring the best national competitors, and highly coveted. The Grande Prêmio races are sought after for both their big prizes and their prestige, bringing international status and renown to the winners. The achievement of winning all three races in a single season is so uncommon that the few triple crown winners in the entire history of the Brazilian Jockey Club have their photographs displayed at the Gávea racetrack, on a mural dedicated exclusively to them. A major race, intense competition or decisive moments evoke feelings and emotions, solidifying the trajectories of competitors in turf racing and are often deserving of special places in the sport's recent history. After the feat, Bal a Bali was valued at US\$ 6 million and sold to a stud farm in the United States. In August 2014, however, shortly after the sale, the horse was diagnosed with laminitis (a chronic inflammation of the hoof lamina), which almost led to the animal being euthanized. It was sold again and narrowly avoided an early retirement for breeding. Put back into racing again, it won its first G1¹⁸ championship on US racetracks. Recently, Bal a Bali entered a breeding program, and in 2018 its stud fee was estimated at US\$ 15 million ("Um craque de nome Bal A Bali" 2020). On March 7, 2019, its first filly (Rosa Brava) was born in the United States, continuing a champion lineage ("Bal a Bali tem (...) " 2019).

As Bal a Bali's case exemplifies, the horse racing markets articulate spaces of production and breeding that transform the horse into a privileged commodity, with use and exchange values, embedded within a culturally defined network of economic circulation (Zelizer 2011b) dictated by the sport's standards, focused on success on the tracks, combining spaces of breeding, care and training. Consequently, the value of the horse-commodity improves proportionally as it achieves notable performances. On the other hand, horses owned by individuals seeking to divest from their "investments" may be entered into "claiming races,"¹⁹ where the animals are auctioned off to interested buyers, often impressed by their individual performances. If there are no buyers, the horse returns to the owner, who will then decide what to do with it. There is no single course of action taken, but among the most common and likely outcomes is direct sale to another buyer, as in the case of Bal a Bali, or the owners

17 Currently, the competitors who have achieved the Triple Crown in Rio de Janeiro are Mossoró (1933), Criolano (1942), Quiproquó (1953), Timão (1956), Escorial (1959), African Boy (1979), Old Master (1984), Itajara (1987), Groove (1996), Super Power (2000), Plenty of Kicks (2012) and Bal a Bali (2014).

18 Group races are considered more demanding and feature competitors with increasingly higher levels of skill. In Brazil, for example, during the 2014/15 season (July 1, 2014–June 30, 2015), there were 28 Group-1 (G1) races, 33 Group-2 (G2) races, and 40 Group-3 (G3) races on the race calendar. A total of 101 Group (G) races were held over the season. Additionally, 72 other races were conducted, resulting in a total of 173 races overall. These races took place across the Gávea (RJ), Cidade Jardim (SP), Cristal (RS) and Tarumã (PN) racetracks (Labronici 2017: 297).

19 Claiming races are competitive events in which the participating animals are grouped according to their claiming prices: that is, they will be auctioned off at the end according to specific regulations.

may still attempt to place the animals in the breeding industry (as stallions), although in many cases, this marks the end for male horses that are winners and hold greater prestige. In the case of female animals, the selection based on aptitude is less strict, and the majority are destined for breeding after retirement from the racetracks.

On the other hand, even highly prestigious animals deemed to be in good health can be retired from racing and permanently removed from the horse racing circuits for various purposes, or, not uncommonly, they may be sacrificed. In many cases, the act of euthanizing horses in the horse racing industry is driven by economic factors, as was evident in the case of Bal a Bali, who narrowly escaped euthanasia despite being a great champion. The notion of sacrifice is not conceived as something with a socially valued function, as in the line of analysis that pervades the modern history of anthropology, particularly since Mauss and Hubert (2005). The killing of animals itself, devoid of any recognizable purpose or justification, equates to the semantics of pure violence. The term “sacrifice” in other contexts, as Jean Segata (2016: 835) pointed out, refers to a “useless death,” which is circumvented pragmatically to deal with the moral issues surrounding animal death. Animals are killed for pragmatic purposes: food consumption, organ utilization, or to prevent unbearable suffering. However, in the economic lexicon of horse racing, euthanasia is synonymous with a necessary death to avoid accumulating losses. It is part of the economics of the sport. Materially, the killing of the animal, which at times may occur on the track in plain view of the public, is perceived as a way to prevent the accumulation of losses due to the high maintenance costs for an animal that will provide little or no financial return. Animals that are unable to participate in races or be sent to other markets, such as breeding, lose their sense of existence in the horse racing universe, and their most dignified end is a quick and serene death. As Kristen Guest and Monica Mattfeld (2020) have pointed out, these convergences of ideas about nature and natural behavior with issues of human financial benefit, emotional satisfaction or aesthetics suggest how the idea of the breed has exerted significant ideological power in human society. Employing breed as a marker of purity, according to the authors, thus engages in modernist disputes of imperialist animality, social Darwinian systems of selection, and human oppression in global systems of human and animal meat trade. Essentially, as Donna Haraway (2019) provocatively suggests, questions regarding racial (breed) crossing and purity, both in the animal and human realm, ultimately become entangled in the ongoing struggle over who lives and who dies. Thus, in horse racing, an animal rendered unable to race loses its sense of existence in the horse racing universe. As I have argued, the relationship between humans and nature in this activity is intrinsically connected to the production of animals with valued attributes for the sport, and the market exerts overt control over these animals from before their physical existence until their death.

Profit expectations (not only on the tracks but in the market as a whole) are thus in line with the controls imposed by humans on nature. The adaptability of domestic plants and

animals is linked to the needs and whims of humans. In horse racing, specific techniques are employed by actors to domesticate the animals in pursuit of suitability and the “optimization of biology,” based on the racing market. The use of this concept can lead to what Rebecca Cassidy (2002: 8–9) refers to as an association with the degeneration of authentic wild traits. The human ability to select is cumulative: nature stimulates successive variations, and humans direct them to the point where certain breeds, such as horses, have developed almost exclusively around their desires and preferences. In horse racing, this is achieved through specific techniques and genetic evaluations in which horses are selected and chosen, bought and sold among the “best” possible crosses. In the case of Bal a Bali, this is evident when his role as a runner transitions to that of a sire, turning renowned horses into producers of future competitors. The same occurs with other renowned animals, as their genetic material is frozen, allowing them to continue producing offspring even after their death. This transforms the buying and selling of genetic material from these animals into “inputs,” expanding the domestic market focused on the production of champions (see Labronici 2017: 174).

This market of animal production operates through artificial insemination and aims to reduce genetic randomness, the economic risks associated with breeding, and the natural chance involved in the process of creating future competitors. This logic positions Nature as an obstacle of disorder to the desires of human order in horse racing. Medical-scientific knowledge is utilized, therefore, to produce controls and direct breeding along a desired path, embedded in discursive regimes of knowledge/power focused on maximizing profitability and minimizing investment risks. The relationship between medical discourses and the control of animal bodies is related to biopower (Foucault, 2010) and discursive devices that assign value to the production of future competing animals. Although scientific knowledge plays a determining role in the production of these animals, other forms of knowledge are also activated as ways of valuing traits acquired by crossbreeding different animals. A “science of the concrete” (Lévi-Strauss 1966), which experimentally deals with the material world, is thus also produced through processes of “trial and error” in the breeding of sports animals. As pointed out by horse racing enthusiast João in a conversation: “Pairing two good horses greatly increases the chances of producing something worthwhile, but pairing a bad horse with a crappy horse, it’s practically impossible to produce anything decent!” (Labronici 2017: 175). In the case of horse racing, then, reproduction is meticulously manipulated by humans, as breeders seek to keep a “tight rein” on the entire production and breeding process. As noted by Katrin Boniface (2020), throughout the history of Thoroughbred racing, breeders have done more than just “hope for the best” outcome. The proliferation of encyclopedias and sports dictionaries detailing a dizzying variety of coat colors, sizes and shapes of various animal body parts suggests that breeders have engaged in more than indiscriminate crossbreeding, possessing a much more sophisticated and methodical understanding of crossbreeding and generational genetic relationships than might have been assumed.

Thus, in addition to the need to obtain high-quality biogenetic inputs from past champions, the market for Thoroughbred production is ostensibly rooted in the actions of actors who, through specific techniques, create modes of breeding, training, care and conditioning in localities dedicated to pedigree breeding and valuation. This highlights the economic fluency required to secure the best lands and ensure access to good broodmares and bloodlines — which, as Sergio Barcellos (2002: 16) points out, translates as the ability to effectively combine all these variables, making the difference between failure and success in the craft of animal and competitor production.

CONCLUSION

The various functions necessary to produce a race can be stratified in order of importance based on the decision making of certain actors. As I have sought to demonstrate, the hierarchy of power and control over the movement of these animals in this market can be observed according to the proximity of individuals to the horse in their daily lives. As seen above, the closer the person is to the animal in their professional routine (such as jockeys, exercise riders or grooms), the lower their status in the turf hierarchy. Nevertheless, the need for specific knowledge and techniques in their profession remains high. On the other hand, owners, who have little involvement in the actual production of an event and are generally from higher social classes, are the ones who, through the notion of ownership and possession, make most of the key decisions regarding the fate of the animals. These are prestigious individuals who hold active control of the horse racing market.

The notions of ownership, commodity, input and investment add economic significance to the animals used in horse racing, shaping the lexicon of the turf industry. It is thus possible to understand the buying and selling of racehorses as akin to futures markets, where the risks involved are high and there are no certainties of positive outcomes, regardless of actions taken, the quality of inputs, the techniques employed, or the facilities dedicated to production. Chance, “luck” or “misfortune,” to use a term more commonly employed in the betting industry, hovers over the activity, causing results to fluctuate from absolute success to utter disaster. As anthropologist Rafael Velasquez (2015: 56) observes: “(...) as mirrors of humanity, racing reflects life. This is what lies at the deepest level of understanding. We wager on the uncertainties of life. We want to believe that we will succeed and despair when we lose. Defeat is harsh, but it is an important lesson: money is not everything.” And as I have sought to demonstrate, the expectations of gains on the racetrack align with the controls imposed by humans upon nature and reflect the structured market behind the production of the spectacle.

As I have argued, therefore, the economic and symbolic value of the animal is directly associated with the relationship between humans and nature in horse racing, which is intrinsically linked to the production of animals with valued attributes for the sport. The polysemy acquired by the animal throughout the course of turf activity becomes the ultimate symbol

representative of the notion of value within this market, which acquires greater or lesser significance depending on its performance on the racetracks. The market governing horse racing exercises overt control over these animals at all stages of their existence. The naturalness, or nature, of a racehorse, is thus understood to be the result of an active and continuous process shaped by human action, as they create horses for racing and, consequently, shape themselves.

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