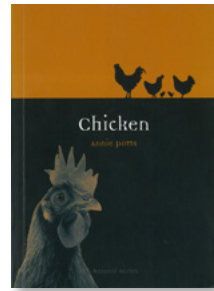


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Extended Written Texts (Non-Fiction)

Potts, Annie. *Chicken*. Reaktion Books Animal Series (2012).
Extracts from chapter 6 (pp. 139, 140, 141, 142, 143, 144, 145 & 153).



6 Meat Chicks and Egg Machines

Worldwide, more than 50 billion chickens are killed for meat each year. In the time required to read this page 16,000 will be killed in the USA alone. America kills around 23 million broiler (or meat) chickens per day, 8–10 billion per year.¹ In the UK over 860 million broiler chickens and 30 million ‘end-of-lay’ hens are killed annually. Australia kills 500 million broiler chickens each year for meat, having raised 96 per cent of them in intensive systems, while 11 million battery hens produce 93 per cent of the nation’s eggs.² Australians refer to the modern poultry industry as ‘technology’s child’; this chapter shows why.³

The modern enslavement of chickens is a very Western and capitalist tale. Its origins are in America, specifically the East Coast region of Delmarva, where the broiler industry arose, and Petaluma in California, where battery farming for eggs began. Breakthroughs in animal husbandry converged with technological and commercial developments around the beginning of the twentieth century radically to alter the role and status of the chicken. At each stage of research and development the chicken’s natural proclivities were subordinated or exploited to produce the industrial ‘utility bird’ of today.

The development of new farming technologies and practices removed the seasonal limitations on the poultry business. The first major inventions were the incubator, designed by a resident of Petaluma, California, Lyman Byce, in 1879, and the colony brooder. The former offered automatic ventilation, controlled temperature and mechanized turning of eggs, permitting the artificial incubation of vast numbers of eggs at once, while the latter allowed 300–1,000 hatched chicks to be raised together under stoves heated by kerosene or coal until their feathers grew.⁴ Both apparatuses separated chicks from their mother and the natural environment.

The cessation of laying by hens when daylight hours shortened – a behaviour considered most inconvenient and uneconomical by farmers – was foiled through the introduction of artificial lighting in henhouses.

Specialized breeding programmes also accelerated in the early twentieth century. The ‘artificial evolution’ of chickens through selective breeding had already begun during the late nineteenth-century ‘hen craze’, when chickens of different varieties were all the rage. The careful monitoring by poultry associations of the criteria for fancy breeds produced a more portentous outcome because it demonstrated that certain chickens were superior layers, while others were better to eat. This resulted in the separation of egg farming from the farming of chickens for meat.

The most profound change, however, was the confinement of thousands of chickens indoors for the purposes of management and control.

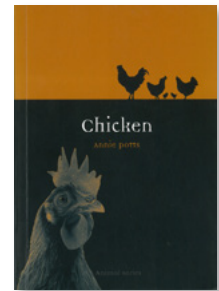
MEAT BABIES

Broiler chicks are conceived at specialized breeding facilities. Hens ‘parent’ chicks only until laying. Fertilized eggs are incubated mechanically and hatched chicks are transported to windowless broiler sheds or ‘grow-out’ houses, typically 400–500 by 40–46 feet (120–150 by 12–14 metres) where they live for six weeks in crowds of 10,000 to 30,000. Females may be killed as early as three weeks as ‘Cornish game hens’, while males may live three months if raised to be ‘roasters’. Typically, broiler chicks are exposed to 23 hours of dim lighting for every one hour of darkness, in order to minimize activity while increasing appetite, and they stand or lie on litter that remains unchanged for the

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Life inside a modern-day broiler shed.



Due to their genetic propensity to 'bulk up', chicks raised for meat are crippled within a few weeks of life. These birds, rescued by Chocowinity Chicken Sanctuary, did not survive long after this photo was taken.

duration of their lives. At slaughter age they are still juveniles, with the soft feathers and chirp-like vocalizations of chicks.

The European Union Science Committee stipulates a stocking density for meat chicks of no more than twelve birds per square metre, but in practice they tend to be housed more 'economically'. The UK, where 98 per cent of chicken meat production is intensive, allows up to nineteen birds per square metre; New Zealand and Australia permit twenty. On average, each broiler chick has a personal space smaller than an A4 sheet of paper. The mortality rate prior to slaughter is around 5 per cent in Britain, which means 45 million chicks die annually in 'grow out' houses before reaching 'market weight'.³³

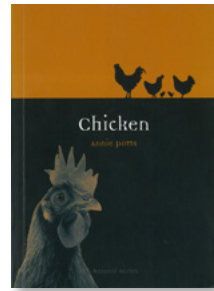
Broiler chicks have been selectively bred to grow fatter faster, which places intense pressure on their bodies: muscles and fat outgrow skeletons. Like other birds, chickens have delicate bones adapted to flight and quick movement, but the bones of broiler chicks are loaded with massively disproportionate breast weights. Consequently, their legs are often twisted and malformed. Up to 30 per cent suffer severe lameness and swelling, and at least that many suffer chronic pain. Veterinary scientists at Bristol University have shown that broiler chicks will self-medicate with food containing an unpleasant flavoured painkiller called Carprofen, and that the amount of the drug ingested increases with the severity of lameness.³⁶ This clearly demonstrates that broiler chicks routinely suffer pain and seek relief from it, despite the bitter taste of the analgesic. Currently, pain relief is not administered to broiler chicks or battery hens because chicken meat sold for consumption must derive from birds that have been free of drugs for at least 28 days. Unfortunately, this is the exact period when leg injuries are most prevalent.

By the time that their six weeks are up, broiler chicks find it hard to walk at all, and most spend 90 per cent of the time lying down in soiled litter. Many collapse for good: farmers refer to this condition as 'off their legs'. Being stranded on their own waste causes breast blisters and foot-pad dermatitis, and hock burns in chicks, effects sometimes observable in the bruising seen on their carcasses in the supermarket. Broiler chicks also succumb to heart failure, liver disease and fluid build-up in the abdomen due to organ system failures. The larger males are particularly prone to Flip-Over Syndrome: sudden death by heart failure preceded by frantic wing flapping, convulsions and collapse.

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'NATURAL' LAYERS?

In 2007, in the United States, more than 77.3 billion eggs were produced by 280 million hens (an average of 275 eggs per hen).³⁹ The lives of battery hens – intensively farmed egg-layers – are no less unhappy than those of broilers, but are much more visible to consumers due to decades of activism and open rescues. Although layer hens will not be baby chicks when dispatched to the slaughterhouse, they will have endured up to two years incarceration in tiny cages, subject to persistent noise, toxic smells and almost constant lighting. Seventy years ago a battery farm housing 100,000 hens would have been considered immense; today, it is not unusual for egg farms to keep 10 million birds at a time.



There are no cockerels here. Male chicks, extraneous to the egg industry (except as breeders), are destroyed within twenty-four hours of hatching. Each year in the US alone more than 272 million male chicks are disposed of by gassing, microwaving, smothering or maceration (also termed 'instantaneous fragmentation'), their collective remains used as pet food.⁴⁰ Industry



experts claim that fragmentation by fast rotating knives is the most humane method of extermination because it is the quickest,⁴¹ yet the process is seldom highlighted by egg producers since it seems unlikely to win favour with a public for whom baby chicks are synonymous with cuteness, Easter, springtime and new life.

Layer pullets (young female chickens) are reared on deep litter or in cages until they are transferred to battery farms at about four months, when they begin laying. The remainder of their lives is spent inside cramped cages along with between four and nine cage mates. Thousands of identical cages are lined up



in rows and stacked in vertical tiers. Water is supplied through nipple drinkers and food from a trough through the cage wires in front. Excrement drops through the floor of the cage for collection later. Eggs roll along a gradient into collection troughs. The birds experience unnatural lighting for around seventeen hours of the day, although those on lower tiers live in constant gloom.⁴²

The advantages of battery operations for farmers are that thousands of birds can be controlled efficiently and economically, while eggs are easier to collect and less likely to be damaged during the laying process. For the birds, however, the constrained conditions do not allow even minimal normal behaviours. The area required to preen, scratch or merely turn round in is about three times greater than the space provided. Sometimes the height of the cage is not even enough to permit hens to stand properly.