

Factory Farming:  
The Truth about the Poultry Industry  
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Just in the past fifty years, the word *farm* has acquired a new meaning. The farms of wide-open pastures, free-ranging cows, and chicken pens are becoming a thing of the past. Today, the farm industry is turning into a factory—a completely industrialized machine. Animals that are raised for food are seen solely as a way to earn profit. Animals are now treated as goods, mere means to the producers, and are no longer seen as living organisms that are helping people survive. The norm of giving thanks to animals for providing sustenance for families has devolved into instances of brutal handling and neglect. Large companies have corrupted a system that used to treat animals raised for food more humanely. Farm animals from cows to pig to chickens are subjected to a life raised in a factory farm. The chicken industry is one of the biggest meat industries in the world; therefore, consumers need to be aware of the harsh conditions chickens are forced to live in and know alternatives to these treatments.

Today, animals are treated like products, stacked together in tight spaces to maximize profits and minimize expenses. That is what an industry's main goal is though, right? To do whatever it can to earn the most money while spending the least. Usually that would be the case, but when the so-called “products” are living organisms, the priorities of the company should change. No longer should the main goal of the company be productivity, but the welfare of their products. Chickens are used for two purposes in the food industry: to produce eggs and meat. The chickens that produce eggs are called laying hens and the chickens that are consumed for meat are called boiler chickens. Between the laying hens and the boiler chickens, the chicken is the animal most used by humans—about 9 to 10 billion worldwide each year (Rollin 117). Because they are an important commodity to the meat industry, chickens should receive adequate care and living space. However, this is not the case when big factories are housing the chickens.

Laying hens spend most of their lives in battery cages, which are small wire cages that hold five hens. These chickens have no space to move or spread their wings. Many times the hens' feet become deformed because of the unnatural surface that they are forced to stand on. Being confined in such a small space puts stress on the animals and causes instinctual behaviors like cannibalism and self-mutilation (Achor 78). The industry has “fixed” the problem, not by giving the hens more room to move around, but by a process called debeaking. Debeaking is the act of cutting off a third of the hens' upper-beak with a hot-blade in hopes that the hens will not be able to peck at themselves. The industry has tried to argue that the procedure does not hurt the hens, but as the blade is cutting through cartilage, the process appears to be painful (Rollin 119).

Like other female animals in the meat industry, laying hens are used as reproduction tools. Their lives are stressful and demanding, for they are constantly going through egg cycles which takes a great toll on their bodies. During the two years the average laying hen spends in the battery cages, it will be forced into countless egg cycles: “In 1933, the average yield per hen was 70 eggs a year. A yield of 150 eggs from a six-pound hen was considered unattainable. Today a four-pound hen produces 275 eggs per year” (Rollin 118-119). This once seemingly impossible feat is achieved by forcing the hens into an unnatural number of egg cycles. The hens are forced to molt, or shed their feathers, because as soon as they grow a new layer of feathers, their reproduction cycles resume. To force the hens to molt, they will be put under a tremendous amount of stress by being deprived of food and water for a certain period of

time each day (Rollin 125). The stress manipulates the hens' egg cycles. The fast-paced reproduction process is far from ordinary and causes cruel and unnatural behavior in the hens and their offspring.

The chicks that hatch from the laying hens never meet their mothers. They are hatched in incubators and are almost immediately sorted by gender. The female chicks are considered to be productive because at just a few days old, they will be able to lay eggs. They then undergo the debeaking procedure, which results in death for some because of the shock. The male chicks are not useful and are therefore killed. Sometimes they are thrown into garbage bags where they will eventually suffocate, some are drowned, and some are ground up for pet food. According to Amy Achor, author of *Animal Rights: A Beginner's Guide*, "over 200 million male chicks meet this fate every year" (81). These chicks, as well as their mothers, are never able to experience the natural life that they as living organisms deserve.

Laying hens will meet an earlier death than if they had grown in a natural environment. Usually hens become "spent," or do not produce any more eggs, after about two years in the battery cages. A normal hen could live from 15 to 20 years. When the hens' productivity declines, they are sent to slaughter (Achor 82). Usually the meat of laying hens is tough, and bruising is evident. Laying hens are usually cooked; the meat is then shredded and put into pot pies to hide the bruising and toughness of the meat (Gregory 122). Bruises on the meat are hidden so that consumers are less likely to think that the factories producing the meat treat chickens in a brutal manner. The suffering of these hens does not last long, but that pain can be avoided altogether if companies would focus less on cutting costs and more on the welfare of their animals.

Many farms have sold out to larger industries, but there are still farmers in the United States that believe in a more humane way of treating farm animals. One farm that is a more animal-friendly farm is Polyface Farm located in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley. The farm was founded by the Salatin Family in 1961 with the hopes of producing "America's premier non-industrial food production oasis" (Salatin). Polyface Farm prides itself on trying to mimic nature as much as possible. Joel Salatin, the owner of Polyface Farm, does not like what industries have done to food production and has said that he is "always struck by how successful we have been at hitting the bulls-eye of the wrong target" (*Food, Inc.*). The documentary *Food, Inc.* filmed Polyface Farm to show the natural and compassionate qualities Salatin feels are necessary to produce the best meat.

Unlike major corporations, Polyface Farm allows its laying hens the enjoyment of the fresh air and wide spaces. This means the animals are allowed into pastures, and as a result, the large majority of their diet is grass based. The hens live in what is called the Eggmobile—a 12-foot by 20-foot hen house, which is fully portable. The Eggmobile follows the cattle in their pasture rotations and is housed on grass that cows have just mowed down. The hens roam free on the freshly cut pasture enclosed by an electric fence. Letting the hens roam the pastures does not only allow them a more natural environment, but it also helps keep the pastures clean. The pastures the hens are rotated in are covered with cow pies, which hens have a natural instinct to pick through for bugs and other food. As the hens follow the cows in the pastures, the process of picking through cow pies helps keep the fields clean and cuts down on the labor that the farmhands have to do (*Food, Inc.*). Once the laying hens are past their peak production on Polyface Farm, they are sold as broiler hens. Since the hens had not been treated brutally and didn't have to endure battery cages, as they would have in industrial plants, their meat is not bruised and is therefore more appealing to consumers. Naturally, the laying hens' meat is tougher because of the age of the meat, but at Polyface Farm, it is sold with the disclaimer that the chicken needs to be stewed longer to create tenderness or can be made into a broth.

In the documentary *Food Inc.*, Joel Salatin claims that the industrial food industry is not the only way to produce meat and is most certainly not the most humane way. There are alternatives to mass slaughter and machine-run factories. The main reason the factories have become so common is the fact that they are cheaper to operate, but as Salatin asks, “Is it really all about cheapness? Are we willing to buy the cheapest car?” (*Food, Inc.*). Why are people so willing to spend money on purely material things, but when it comes to what they put in their bodies, they go for the unhealthy, industrialized options? Adding a little more room in the shopping budget can cover organic foods that are healthier for the consumer and were produced in a more trustworthy way. Corporations have corrupted the food production system and the “big guys” that make all of the decisions “do not have to live with the consequences of those decisions” (*Food, Inc.*). Small farms are the food industry’s best hope of regaining some semblance of a time when food production was not about quantity but about quality.

Gone are the days of the family farm; society now demands the factory farm—an industry that treats animals as products and is not concerned at all with their welfare. Chickens in America have very little protection and even fewer rights. One would think that people should be protecting chickens, the largest meat industry in the world, yet these creatures are cast aside like objects. Polyface Farm has shown that it is not impossible to create a safe, caring environment for farm animals to live and be raised in. Polyface Farm is a farm with mutualism values that provides a humane place for animals to be raised before slaughter. Animals not only provide a source of income for the farm, but help with production and work. Unlike in industrial farms, the relationship the Polyface farmers have with their animals is more respectful, which results in happier lives for the livestock. Companies are still not willing to spend the extra money to make the food production process safer for the animals. Unfortunately, this is an age where cheaper is always better and quicker is always easier. Farm animals have no rights, and will not have any until the consumers of America speak up for them.

#### Works Cited

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