

Structural Injustice in the American Chicken-farming Industry

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ABSTRACT: American chicken farming is an industry worth \$32.7 billion a year. As the national per capita consumption of chicken increases in parallel with the population generally, the value of the industry can only go up in kind. But chicken profits are conspicuously concentrated in the hands of enormous multinational corporations, which have left those farmers that actually raise the chickens financially behind—farmers with whom these corporations have a contract-based relationship. In this paper, I apply the structural insights of Sally Haslanger and John Rawls to, first, identify the hotspots of injustice in the chicken industry, and, second, suggest how blame might be distributed and solutions achieved. More specifically, I examine the interaction of (1) market domination by four enormous multinational corporations; (2) the contracting-out of chicken farming, in contrast to the tight vertical integration uniting each other step of the broiler-chicken process; (3) the strength of industry-secrets-protecting, anti-journalistic ‘ag-gag’ laws; and (4) the concentration of chicken farms in the American South. I then demonstrate that the combination of these four features of contemporary American chicken farming severely circumscribes the choice architecture of contract farmers. I target information asymmetry as an especially salient problem that contributes to the “invisible foot” of corporate domination of small farmers, and examine the state of Arkansas to witness this structural injustice in action. Furthermore, the importance of cheap chicken to the American diet, its staple-food status, and the degree of moral harm at all levels (from animal rights to global warming to the curtailment of farmers’ choice architecture) make the structural injustice at the heart of the chicken industry a matter of bioethical importance.

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