

**A Marxian Analysis of
Industrial Poultry Farming:
What Would Marx Say?**

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*Photo by Frank Johnston,
The Washington Post*

Chickens were the first farm animals to be permanently confined indoors in large numbers in automated systems based on genetic engineering, antibiotics, and drugs. In the 20th century, the U.S. poultry industry became the model for animal factory farming throughout the world.



The morality of forcing human beings to subsist in alien environments to serve economic objectives was analyzed by Karl Marx in terms that provide insight into the experience of chickens shunted into human-created environments that are alien to their nature. Marx described four interrelated aspects of alienation: from the product, from the productive activity, from normal social life, and from Nature. Let us look at chickens and poultry industry workers from a Marxian point of view.

Chickens in industrial food production are:

- **Alienated From Their Own Products**
- **Alienated From Their Own Productive Activity**
- **Alienated From Their Own Societies**
- **Alienated From The Natural World**

Chickens in industrial food production are:

- **Alienated From Their Own Products**

Factory-farmed chickens are alienated from their own products, which consist of their eggs, their chicks, and parts of their own bodies. Parents and their young are severed from one another. They live and die without ever knowing each other as parents, siblings or progeny. The relationship between the chicken and his or her own body is perverted and degraded by factory farming.

Chickens in industrial food production are:

- **Alienated From Their Own Productive Activity**

Chickens are alienated from their own productive activity, which is reduced to the single biological function of laying eggs or gaining weight at the expense of the whole bird. Normal expressiveness and energy expenditure is considered a “waste of feed” by the industry.

Chickens in industrial food production are:

- **Alienated From Their Own Societies**

Chickens are alienated from their own societies. They are crowded, caged, and confined in vast buildings that prevent normal social relationships from developing. They are deprived of natural contact with other age groups and sexes within their own species, resulting in abnormal behaviors induced by the pathological stress they are experiencing without any form of relief.

Chickens in industrial food production are:

- **Alienated From The Natural World**

Most encompassingly, factory-farmed chickens are alienated from surrounding nature, from an outer world that answers intelligently to their own inner world. There is nothing for them to do or see or look forward to, no voluntary actions are permitted, or joy, or zest of living. They just have to be, in an existential void, until we kill them.

From the Chicken in Nature



*Art print of Red Jungle Fowl
A Hen and a Rooster*

Chicken Family in the Florida Everglades



Photo by Davida G. Breier

Another mother hen with her growing chicks in the Florida Everglades



Photo by Davida G. Breier

UPC hens Freddaflower, Charity, and Zelda dustbathing at United Poultry Concerns.



Photo by Karen Davis

UPC sanctuary chickens Miss Sentinel Soul & Sir Valery Valentine.

Photo by Davida G. Breier





**To the
“Animal
Machine”**

At the automated hatchery the “contents of the trays (chicks, shells, eggs) are tipped onto a belt conveyer which then transports the chicks, eggs, shells, etc. to the separating roller conveyer. As the birds spread out across these oscillating rollers, they fall through the opening between the rollers to a belt or rod conveyor, which removes them from the machine. This process separates the chicks from the unhatched whole eggs and larger eggshells, as they are transported to the waste removal system.”

– Bell and Weaver, Commercial Chicken Meat and Egg Production, 698-699.



Chicken "sexers" separate the newly hatched birds by gender at a rate of one chick per second. Males are tossed into a big funnel in the center, while females go on an outer belt. The Delmarva region sends 571 million chickens a year to area markets.

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Photo by David Harp

An automatic counter dumps 100 chicks into each plastic tray: “yellow for the boys, blue for the girls.”

Photo by David Harp,
Washingtonian Magazine



Chicks in a hatchery garbage bag slowly suffocate to death.



Photos courtesy of The Animals Voice



The Ultimate Act of Alienation

The term “genocide,” originally formulated by the Polish jurist Raphael Lemkin in his 1944 book, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, did not pertain only to the attempted or accomplished physical extermination of a particular group by an oppressor, but to all of the ways in which oppressors seek to replace their victims’ *identity* with their own agenda.

Weaver Brothers Egg Farm in Versailles, Ohio

Photo by Mercy For Animals



Six-week old chickens in a Delaware chicken house



*Photo by
David Harp*

Despite the patterns of oppression imposed on the bodies and spirits of chickens by human exploiters, when these “factory-farm” birds are restored to the natural world from which they were forcibly removed, they respond. Their innate identity has not (yet) been eradicated by the alien forces of artificial breeding, mechanization, and imprisonment.

Chickens bred for “meat” enjoy the wooded places at our sanctuary in Virginia.

Photo by Karen Davis



Despite thousands of years of domestication, chickens are essentially the wild jungle fowl of their ancestry, with the same cravings for lush soil, trees, and activities suited to the tropical forests they originated in.

UPC Sanctuary hens rescued from battery cages. Photo by Susan Rayfield



Alienation of Workers from the Chickens

“Baby chickens ‘cooked alive’ at hatchery,” CBC News, April 15, 2014

“The footage shows dead chicks coming out of a dishwasher, likely as a result of getting their feet caught in baskets that go into the high-temperature washer. When the undercover worker asks how they die, ***an employee laughs and says, ‘They boil! I have no sympathy for them anymore.’***”

“The footage also shows an employee euthanizing [sic] sick and injured chicks by dumping several large baskets of chicks into a mechanical macerator and pushing them into the grinder with a squeegee.”

Megan Rieley looks over the current flock of 90,000 – about two days away from market – that stretches as far as the eye can see in the family's three chicken houses.

Photo by David Harp



Suffering and Abuse of Poultry Workers

Along with better financial security, poultry growers, slaughterhouse workers, chicken catchers, “live-haul” drivers, and forklift operators desire a sense of dignity from the companies they work for. But their wish runs counter to the history of the industry which prides itself on having overcome any attitude of appreciating individual people. Birds and workers together are “part of an efficient system of food production.” – *American Poultry History* 1823-1973



Chicken Catcher Photos by Frank Johnston — *The Washington Post*

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Work for “Inhuman” Hands

The work involved in poultry processing is demanding, repetitive and often dangerous. Perhaps the most difficult and labor intensive job is held by live hangers, “who shackle by the legs 25 birds/minute while the chickens ‘scratch, peck and defecate all over them.’”

The workers on the assembly line must keep pace with fast-moving conveyor belts while they use knives, scissors and their bare hands to split chickens open, scoop out their innards (called “evisceration”), and remove the meat from the bone (called “deboning”). One author captures the grueling nature of poultry processing work:

“Only inhuman hands could withstand the pain caused by as many as 40,000 daily repetitions of a single defined movement, such as the same knife or scissors cut to slit open carcasses from anus to breast or the same twist of the hand to yank out viscera at a grueling pace, set by a relentless conveyor belt and reinforced by circulating foremen, while the workers are standing in pools of water and grease in temperatures that range from freezing to 95 degrees and being pelted by flying fat globules or dripping blood.”



Poultry line workers are among some of the most vulnerable laborers in the U.S. The polyglot workforces often include immigrants from Latin American and African countries, who generally work for low pay on demanding production schedules. Class-action lawsuits have become common in the industry, with workers claiming they're shorted on their wages or required to work off the clock.

**From “Poultry Worker Study Finds Alarming Rate of Carpal Tunnel as USDA Considers Line Speedup,”
Huffington Post, June 5, 2013**

AT CHICKEN PLANTS, CHEMICALS BLAMED FOR HEALTH AILMENTS ARE POISED TO PROLIFERATE

The Washington Post, Kimberly Kindy, April 25, 2013

When Jose Navarro landed a job as a federal poultry inspector in 2006, he moved his wife and newborn son to a rural town in Upstate New York near the processing plant, believing it was a steppingstone to a better life.

Five years later, Navarro was dead. The 37-year-old's lungs had bled out.

His death triggered a federal investigation that raised questions about the health risks associated with a rise in the use of toxic, bacteria-killing chemicals in poultry plants.



Photo Courtesy of Navarro Family

“Kill floor” worker, Virgil Butler, went from alienation from the chickens (and his own feelings) to acknowledging the empathy he felt but was afraid to admit or reveal.

Virgil documented the horrific chicken and worker abuse – workers being abused and abusive – that he saw every night at the Tyson chicken slaughter plant in Grannis, Arkansas, from 1997 to 2002. He changed his life completely, speaking out boldly at considerable risk to himself in a region dominated by Tyson Foods.



Virgil Butler and Laura Alexander

Photo by Karen Davis

Interviewer: One of the most powerful things you describe in your writing is making eye contact with the chickens on the slaughter line and seeing their terror. Was there a time when you didn't "see" them, but then you did?

Virgil Butler: I felt that connection from the first night I killed. I just suppressed how I felt because it would have been an unpopular opinion among the other workers. What happened was that this feeling just kept adding up and getting worse. . . .



Virgil Butler and Laura Alexander

Photo by Karen Davis

When Virgil met Laura Alexander, he saw his work through her eyes. “My attitude [after meeting Laura] changed in such a way as to make me not want to go to work anymore.”

Laura Alexander: I asked Virgil to take me back to the hanging cage where he worked so I could see for myself what it looked like. I had prepared myself to feel disgusted, sad, and uncomfortable, but nothing could have prepared me for the way I felt when I saw it. It was like this wave – this wall – of negative energy hitting me in the face when we opened the door . . . that feeling you get in places like hospitals and jails, where there is suffering and death, dread and fear. Well, take that feeling and magnify it by at least 10 and you will have maybe an *inkling* of what I felt at the door of that room that day. I couldn't leave fast enough.

Interviewer: Do you think from your perception that the chickens have a sense of what is going to happen to them?

Virgil Butler: Yes, they try everything in their power to get away from the machine and to get away from you – even the ones that are stunned into immobility. If these people are trying to say, “Because this chicken is stunned, it doesn’t know what’s going on or it doesn’t feel what’s going on,” they are lying to you. I stood there on the kill floor and watched it. The chickens will look at you. They try to hide their head from you by sticking it under the wing of the chicken next to them on the slaughter line. They’ll open up their mouths; they’ll try to squawk. They’ll get as mobile as they can, trying to get away. Of course, they have been stunned so their muscles don’t work, but their eyes do and you can tell by them looking at you that they are scared to death.

Interviewer: So, do you eat chicken anymore?

Virgil Butler: No, I haven't eaten chicken in a long time.

Virgil Butler & Laura Alexander: We just couldn't look at a piece of meat anymore without seeing the sad, tortured face that was attached to it sometime in the past. If people can start to realize they are being lied to by the poultry industry and the government, and that the horrible things we've described are not isolated in any way, we hope people will question the effect that their actions have on the world around them, especially on the innocent creatures who share it with us. We hope people will join us in changing their lives.

Virgil Butler died in his
pick-up truck in Arkansas
December 15, 2006.

This presentation is inspired
by Virgil's courage and
dedicated to his memory,
with profound gratitude to
Laura Alexander who
rescued him with her love.



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