

Re/Thinking Chickens:

The Discourse around Chicken
Farming in British Newspapers
and Campaigners' Magazines,
1982–2016

by

Elena Lazutkaite

Series in Communication



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Dedicated to my grandfather Prof. Stanislovas Lazutka.

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List of acronyms and abbreviations

AA	Animal Aid
AF	Absolute frequency
A-IC	Animal-Industrial Complex
BPC	British Poultry Council
BSE	Bovine spongiform encephalopathy
CAS	Critical Animal Studies
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
CIWF	Compassion in World Farming
CL	Corpus Linguistics
div	Division by zero is disallowed
EFSA	European Food Safety Authority
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FAWC	Farm Animal Welfare Committee (former Farm Animal Welfare Council)
FMD	Foot and mouth disease
LL	Log-likelihood
NF	Normalised frequency
NFU	National Farmers' Union
PDA	Positive Discourse Analysis
PETA	People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals
RSPCA	Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals
UN	United Nations
WHO	World Health Organisation

Preface

Judith Still

University of Nottingham

Chickens are, as Elena Lazutkaite¹ shows, the animal of the Anthropocene par excellence. This is not only because of the size of their population today. Chickens are everywhere and nowhere—they are hiding in plain sight. There are more chickens in the world than any other bird. More than 60 billion chickens are reared annually as a source of meat and eggs. In the United States alone, more than 9 billion chickens are slaughtered each year for meat, and more than 300 million chickens are reared for egg production.² Chickens raised for meat are then the first animal species suggested as a marker of the Anthropocene Epoch: “broiler chickens, now unable to survive without human intervention, have a combined mass exceeding that of all other birds on Earth; this novel morphotype symbolizes the unprecedented human reconfiguration of the Earth’s biosphere.”³ But they are confined, hidden—in the United States they do not exist in Federal law; how often do you see, let alone touch, a (living) chicken, as opposed to ‘chicken’ disguised in some obscure form or other? Nicholas Royle suggests indeed, with his aptly-named ‘Hides’ in his 2017 novel *An English Guide to Birdwatching*, that ‘ornithomorphic’ linguistic play tends to be simultaneously revealing and concealing:

Closely linked to that world of crime [the disavowal of vicious cruelty to chickens], is the outrage of naming. People say *chicken* in the singular when they are actually talking about *chickens* in the plural. Mixing their metaphors in a vague toilet

¹ Elena completed her PhD thesis, on which this book is based, at the University of Nottingham in 2020. I had the pleasure of co-supervising her work in the Centre for Critical Theory with colleagues in Archaeology, first Naomi Sykes (who was leading a large AHRC chicken project) and then, following Naomi’s move to Exeter, with Christopher King.

² The Food and Agriculture Organisation notes that worldwide 68.8 billion chickens were slaughtered for meat in 2018; in the USA, 9 billion chickens were slaughtered for meat and 391 million hens were reared for eggs in 2018. Thanks to Elena Lazutkaite for up to date information.

³ Carys E. Bennett and Richard Thomas, Mark Williams, Jan Zalasiewicz, Matt Edgeworth, Holly Miller, Ben Coles, Alison Foster, Emily J. Burton and Upenyu Marume (2018), ‘The broiler chicken as a signal of a human reconfigured biosphere’, *Royal Society Open Science* 12 December 2018 <https://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.180325>, p.1. Thanks to Christopher King for recommending this article to me.

panic, they try to flush out—meaning flush away—their knowledge of what they are doing by resorting to an abstract plural, a strictly fictional turn of phrase, as part of an elaborate strategy to gloss over the reality of what they are doing. In this seemingly small but telling detail they behave precisely in the manner of *headless chickens*.⁴

Lazutkaite's book is a fascinating case study providing ample empirical evidence to support her analysis of the representation of farmed chickens in four British newspapers and two animal campaigning magazines. Her work shows how chickens are 'screened'—shown as objects produced and consumed while disguised as subjects with emotional or mental lives as well as physical existences. It is unusual in that it brings together a corpus linguistics methodology which allows a large number of texts to be examined, preventing any accusation of cherry-picking quotations, and ensuring breadth, with discourse analysis that enables a more in-depth and forensic approach to the assumptions underlying news items as well as opinion pieces. Lazutkaite shows that in news items farmed chickens are typically objectified, viewed from a human-centred perspective. They are the raw material producing profit or loss for farmers, whether the worst factory farmers or the best organic farmers, or they are the source of protein for consumers, whether unhealthy 'cheap' food for the masses condemned by the likes of Jamie Oliver or delicious (expensive) dishes promoted by the likes of Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall. They are also figured as a reservoir of disease transmissible to humans when food scares (salmonella) or other threats (bird flu) emerge, necessitating the slaughter of many chickens—a holocaust presented as worrying because it reduces the profits of farmers. If chicken suffering is ever evoked, then it is typically treated as a necessary by-product of the human right to eat flesh; at best, lesser suffering (enriched cages) is weighed favourably as more humane against greater suffering (battery cages). Yet 'high welfare' chicken farming, as Lazutkaite shows, is something of a misnomer if we take welfare in its more usual sense.⁵ In opinion pieces, the ethics of meat-eating are occasionally raised,

⁴ Nicholas Royle, *An English Guide to Birdwatching* (Brighton: Myriad Editions, 2017), p. 270. Royle cites some of the notorious practices of today's 'chicken production' such as 'beak trimming' to avoid cannibalism – a violent mutilation causing lasting pain – typically described as if a mere haircut pp. 271-3.

⁵ See Tom Regan, *Defending Animal Rights* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), chapter 5 'What we learn from Alice'. Regan has no confidence in what animal industries say about their business, arguing that the meaning of e.g. 'humane treatment' is whatever they want it to mean like Humpty Dumpty (p. 78). Regan emphasises that words (such as 'high welfare') have meanings (p. 79), and so industry representatives are lying whether they know they are or not – this is the 'Disconnect Dictum' – what they do does not match what they say. For my discussion of Regan and Singer as representative of animal rights philosophers (who have largely had a positive influence, but tend to 'over-egg' the rationality of their arguments) see, Judith Still, 'Thoughts From France on the Animal-Human

notably in *The Guardian*, which sometimes allows space for animal rights philosophers such as Peter Singer. Yet even the *Guardian* discussions often raise environmental or socio-political issues which relate to industrial farming without specifically addressing the question of chickens as sentient beings to whom humans might have responsibilities. The lack of attention to intersectionality is shown to be lamentable across all the publications that Lazutkaite analyses. I should note that this may have changed a little with the advent of Covid-19. A recent comment piece in *The Guardian* by Jonathan Safran Foer and Aaron S. Gross is entitled: “To Prevent the Next Pandemic We Must Take on Factory Farming.”⁶ They argue that “commercial poultry operations appear to be the Silicon Valley of viral development” (p. 1). This sentiment, I would argue, has been bleeding (if only a little) into news items discussing the link between viruses and “the most powerful industrial complex in the world – the factory farm” (p. 2) as well as the trade in wild animals.⁷

Nevertheless, the well-intentioned debate about the production of “genetically uniform, immune-compromised and regularly drugged animals” (*Ibid.* p. 1) does not necessarily approach the horrors from the perspective of the animals themselves. A very recent ‘long read’ (again outside Lazutkaite’s time period) reveals the shocking conditions for women working in a chicken plant in Arkansas.⁸ These women (many Latina) are forced to accept very low pay and horrifying conditions which on a daily basis mean, for example, wearing adult diapers so that they can manage without toilet breaks. Health and safety standards are appalling, resulting both in extreme industrial accidents and quotidian danger. When the company stopped feeding human antibiotics to chickens in 2017, and instead started spraying antimicrobials on the chicken carcasses, the workers (and there are 250,000 poultry workers in the USA) were exposed to levels of peracetic acid that cause serious health risks. Amongst other issues, these workers are even more vulnerable to Covid-19. The article concludes with the words of one of the worker-activists: “For the future of the country, we must think deeply about the meaning of these workers in our daily lives and stand up for their human rights and dignity – because they’ve always been essential, and if they don’t survive, we won’t survive” (p. 8). This is indeed a scandalous situation, and I hope no reader would wish to undermine the position of food-processing workers (struggling to physically

Borderline: Derrida and Animal Rights Philosophers’ in *French Thought and Literary Theory in the UK* ed. I. Goh (Routledge, 2019), pp. 49-65.

⁶ *Guardian Journal* 21/4/20, pp. 1-2.

⁷ See the editorial comment ‘The Virus is a Warning that Britain’s Food System Must Change’, *The Guardian* 18/4/20 which cites ‘chlorinated chicken and the American mega-farms that it symbolises. Antibiotics, steroid hormones and pesticides’ – and does mention animal welfare considerations *en passant*.

⁸ Mya Frazier, ‘Women On the Front Line’, *The Guardian* 17.4.20, *Journal* pp. 5-8.

distance in the workplace) now starting to die from Covid-19. However, as Lazutkaite's own recent article suggests, coronavirus itself should not be considered in isolation from human-animal relations.⁹ More broadly, nowhere in this very lengthy *Guardian* article does anyone question whether it is indeed *essential* to eat meat—and whether humans could *survive* without killing other animals. If we were instead to make the assumption that our diet could in fact be plant-based, then we could turn to the *ethics* of meat-eating in general.

Lazutkaite argues (with animal rights activists) that since chickens are sentient beings, they should be treated as subjects rather than objects—and thus killing and eating them or their products (notably eggs) is unethical. This is a view which, to her regret, emerges only exceptionally in her corpus in the occasional *Guardian* opinion piece, and, more often, in the campaigning magazine *Outrage* (published by the animal rights organisation Animal Aid). The other campaigning magazine that she analyses, *Farm Animal Voice*, is produced by the animal welfare organisation Compassion in World Farming, which is cited by Singer as instrumental in the first generation of the modern animal movement that began in the 1960s in the UK.¹⁰ Nevertheless, founded by a dairy farmer, this organisation and its publication is in favour of reform of farming rather than a vegan revolution in the way we humans eat.

In a recent essay, Henry Buller summarises and develops some of the strong arguments for the intersubjective bond between farm animals and stockpeople “grounded in the situated practice (and therefore moral significance) of interpersonal relations rather than in the more abstract ethical categorisations that are always so problematic when it comes to non-human animals.”¹¹ He cites Gordon Gatward's argument that a basic component of the *care* of animals is “the ability of the individual stock keeper to form a close and even affectionate working relationship with their animals” (Buller, *Farming*, p. 207).¹² I think that it is interesting to reflect on the possibility of “interspecies, inter-individual negotiation between the achievement of different goods and benefits” (*Ibid.*), familiar to many who live lives entangled with the lives of their companion

⁹ Elena Lazutkaite, ‘How did we get here? Covid-19, climate crisis and the sixth mass extinction’, Lithuanian Radio and Television 7 April 2020 <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1160498/how-did-we-get-here-covid-19-climate-crisis-and-the-sixth-mass-extinction-opinion>.

¹⁰ See Singer, ‘Introduction’ in *In Defense of Animals: The Second Wave* ed. Peter Singer (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 1-10.

¹¹ See Henry Buller, ‘Farming’ in *The Edinburgh Companion to Animal Studies*, ed. Lynn Turner, Undine Sellbach and Ron Broglio (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), pp. 198-214, p. 206.

¹² Gatward, *Livestock Ethics* (Devon: Chalcombe Publications, 2001).

animals.¹³ However, I would note that chicken are included in the argument only when Buller discusses what used to be oxymoronic, but is now simply fact, “factory farming” where: “Individual animal lives become metricated moments in pre-determined productive cycles, animal bodies are materiality-in-the-making driven by feed-weight ratios in an industry where technology and biology, machine and animal, medicines and matter are increasingly intertwined” (Buller, p. 202). When he turns to something more like a pastoral idyll of companionability, the examples tend to focus on large mammals such as cows, sheep and pigs. This need not be the case—Lazutkaite references the phenomenon of backyard chicken keeping (often the source for the few stories she finds which allow individual chickens some agency and personality) which is gradually on the rise—but she makes the case that chickens are particularly (and unfairly) ridiculed as ‘bird-brained’ (dim and comical) in the national discourse represented in the media.

In fact, chickens as companions to farmers and their families have a long history, although an even longer history tells of them as exotic prizes.¹⁴ I shall give an example from eighteenth-century America, the end (for white folk anyway) of the colonial period, and look briefly at the emblematic figure of “the American farmer.” How did he relate to his chickens? The sympathetic Farmer James, a fraternal and decent settler in Pennsylvania, writes that every time he sees an egg on his table he regrets that “but for my gluttony,” the hen will never live and never lead her chicks.¹⁵ He continues:

It might have been a gentle useful hen leading her chickens with a care and vigilance which speaks shame to many women. A cock, perhaps, arrayed with the most majestic plumes, tender to its mate, bold, courageous, endowed with an astonishing instinct, with thoughts, with memory, and every distinguishing characteristic of the reason of man! (p. 28)

These reflections do not prevent him from eating the eggs—nor, we readers presume, the flesh. And yet—he lives with chickens whom he sees as fellow creatures, perhaps even *semblables*. In his final Letter XII, “Distresses of a Frontier-Man” (pp. 187-217), he returns to the chicken, alongside iconic wild

¹³ See notably Donna J. Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto. Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003), and the even more controversial Vicki Hearne, *Adam’s Task: Calling Animals by Name* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986). I discuss some of these questions, particularly that of love between human and other animals in my *Derrida and Other Animals: The Boundaries of the Human* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

¹⁴ See Naomi Sykes, *Beastly Questions: Animal Answers to Archaeological Issues* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

¹⁵ J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, edited by Susan Manning (Oxford: OUP, Oxford World’s Classics, 1997 [1782]), p. 28.

animals, as a perhaps surprising potential *model* for behaviour in an extreme situation of war: “The fox flies or deceives the hounds that pursue him; the bear, when overtaken, boldly resists and attacks them; the hen, the very timid hen, fights for the preservation of her chicken, nor does she decline to attack, and to meet on the wing, even the swift kite” (p. 196). My final example comes from the third volume of his French *Lettres*, so much more than a translation of his *Letters*.¹⁶ It is the sixth of a series of 49 anecdotes entitled ‘*D’un coq et d’une poule*’ [Of a cock and a hen]. Amidst the horrors of the War of Independence, and the terrible English depredations, the author’s mother lost everything except one chicken (*Lettres*, III, p. 107). A friend had saved one cockerel in his cellar (p. 108). Together they founded a new dynasty of chickens. This could of course be an accurate anecdote, but whether it is or not, it shows the indomitable American spirit at the moment when the United States is born. The chickens are the symbol of new life—we might recall that in some ways, the ancient philosophical paradox of the chicken and the egg suggests eternity or infinity in the way that antecedence cannot be established. However, they emblemize life not only in themselves—they live on and reproduce (hence survival even after death)—but they also, through their eggs and flesh, their deaths, give sustenance and thus life to the starving colonists.

Why chickens again? I would argue that they are the extreme example of the Fall, if such it be, from sacrifice to holocaust in human-animal relations.¹⁷ These beautiful feathered friends have such a very long history of cohabitation with human beings across most of the globe, often not as natives but as exotic and precious imports. Even today in Britain, shameful home to Bernard Matthews and his like, backyard chickens, once the resource of the less well-off, have risen again as the beloved pets of the liberal bourgeoisie. Chickens were not first domesticated as a source of protein (flesh and eggs), or certainly not merely for food. Archaeologists have found complete chicken remains alongside human remains in ancient graves, as if prized goods if not companions. They played a key

¹⁶ *Lettres d’un cultivateur américain* (Paris: Cuchet, 1784-7) 3 vols.

¹⁷ In *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), Derrida discusses the huge shift in our relation with animals since the end of the eighteenth century, a period which is widely regarded as the location of the third revolution in relations between humans and animals. This agricultural revolution involves scientific breeding, the forerunner of industrialization of food production. Derrida points out that exploitation, training, hunting, experimentation and so on did not begin in the Enlightenment but are as old as man and ‘what he calls his world, his knowledge, his history, and his technology’ (*The Animal That Therefore I Am*, p. 25). Yet in the last two centuries there has been a ‘bouleversement’ thanks to the conjoined development of ‘savoirs’ and ‘techniques’ – with genetic experimentation and the manipulation of the genome, industrialization of food production (*The Animal That Therefore I Am*, p. 25), and the advent of mass species extinction.

role in religious rituals, and their feathers were valued. Of course, they are also bred to fight—both a particularly spectacular cruelty (unlike the hidden violence of the industrial cage) and, like bullfighting, a practice which involves cherishing and veneration—cockfighting continues even in Europe today. As protein they have shifted from the apex of the weekly communion around a table. Chickens had a particular nourishing role in the French imaginary of food; Henri IV is believed to have declared around 1600 that he would ensure that no one in his kingdom was so poor that he could not afford “a chicken in his pot.” Now globally industrially—we have “chicken”...

Holding chickens close, as Crevecoeur did, does not rule out killing or consumption, but the monstrous scale of the dirty secret of industrial farming is something relatively recent. Domestication has led to scientific breeding. Human bodies and minds have developed in—perhaps—the survival of the fittest. Other domestic animals have sometimes been bred for the brief survival of the weakest—whether fancied dogs who cannot breathe or chickens who cannot walk. Not only are they bred to die, but bred with lethal characteristics. There is an imaginary residue in language, writing, or pictures in children’s books, marketized in figures of happy chickens on egg boxes (to sell eggs produced under lamentable circumstances) but, as Lazutkaite demonstrates, quotidian discourse in the press generally encourages the instrumentalization and objectification of broilers and layers. We all (arguably even vegans) kill to live on some level; all life involves sacrifice. However, the unanswered question, posed by Jacques Derrida, remains: to what extent can we nevertheless “eat well,” live doing less rather than more harm to other beings? Our definition of other beings is still a fluid one—some include only (some?) human beings, others would include trees or rivers.¹⁸ But if we were to take chickens as a case study, granted how many chickens we humans have brought into the world, and reflected on how we could live with chickens more equitably, both species “eating well,” that thought experiment would require a significant displacement from the narrow mindset revealed in Lazutkaite’s meticulous dissection of print journalism.

¹⁸ One recent and unusual attempt to imagine chickens raised on an industrial egg farm as (tortured) minds as well as matter is Deb Olin Unferth’s *Barn 8* (Minneapolis: Grey Wolf Press, 2020). A different and highly controversial art piece that stages fowl sacrifice is Adel Abdessemed’s video of living cockerels whom he has set on fire; see Stéphanie Boulard, ‘*Printemps Hélène Cixous – Adel Abdessemed*’ in *Ententes – A partir d’Hélène Cixous*, ed. Stéphanie Boulard and Catherine Witt (Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2018). This was hard to swallow for me personally, however contradictory that response, granted the quotidian horror of chicken lives and deaths in which we are perhaps all to some degree complicit if only by turning a blind eye never mind enjoying eggs.

1.

Introduction

This book adds to the literature on discursive representations of the “other”. It is informed by a social constructionist approach to meaning-making and belongs to an emerging field of discourse analysis of communication around farmed animals. More specifically, I analyse discourses around chicken farming in British newspapers and campaigners’ flagship magazines published between 1982 and 2016. In total, the study corpus comprises 1754 texts published in broadsheets *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph*, tabloids the *Daily Mirror* and the *Daily Mail* (including their Sunday editions *Sunday Mirror* and *Mail on Sunday*) and magazines *Agscene* and *Farm Animal Voice* produced by the animal welfare organisation Compassion in World Farming (CIWF) and *Outrage* and *The Uncounted Dead: Farming’s Unofficial Victims* published by the animal rights organisation Animal Aid (AA).

My choice of analysing newspapers against other forms of media is explained by their watchdog, gatekeeper and agenda-setting role with the general public, political elites and other forms of media. By choosing their topics, lexis, and sources to cite, newspapers produce identities and shape public discourses, and this applies to most topics including chicken farming. Moreover, since “lay” people may have little or no knowledge nor direct experience of chicken farming, newspapers are important sites of meaning creation.¹ Ironically, the Cultural & Scientific Perceptions of Human-Chicken Interaction project, which I was part of as a PhD student, received some negative feedback in the British newspapers; this backlash and the evident perception of chickens as an illegitimate or unworthy object of study sparked my interest in contemporary framings of chicken farming in British newspapers. *The Daily Express* reflected the view of chickens as comical, trivial, and culturally unimportant “food” animals and was predominantly concerned with the fact that the project was assigned £1.9 million to study human-chicken relationships. It was suggested the project was a waste of tax-payers’ money: “Robert Oxley of the Tax-Payers’ Alliance called the chicken study ‘ridiculous’, adding ‘the amount doled out certainly isn’t chicken feed’” (Dawar, 2013). The *Daily Mail* went further with

¹ My public engagement activities within the Cultural & Scientific Perceptions of Human-Chicken Interaction project showed that “lay” people were lacking knowledge about industry practices such as debeaking or the slaughter age of chickens farmed for meat.

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