

The Environmental History of the Chicken in Paraná, Brazil (1960-1980)

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In 2020, Brazil had the world's third largest poultry industry, after China and the United States. The western part of the southern Brazilian states (Rio Grande do Sul, Santa Catarina, and Paraná) has been a core region in this scenario—both in the past and now, considering it saw the birth of giant agribusinesses such as Sadia and Perdigão (part of BRF SA). Poultry processing and consumption is expanding enormously in Brazil and across the world thanks to the Green Revolution (1960–80) and the expanding grain production (mainly maize and soy) that supports this livestock sector. A key driver of this expansion, so the literature explains, is the increasing per-capita income in many countries around the world, which allows for a meat-heavy diet—as well as dairy and other animal products—in the first time for millennia. Other factors aid this increased consumption as well, like the scientific views about saturated fats and cholesterol in the 1960s and 1970s. After decades of increased consumption, chicken is now the most consumed meat in Brazil after fish and seafood, surpassing beef and pork. Among all this “meatification of diets,” a term used by Tony Weis, chicken is at the head of the process, considering that the smaller the animal, the more efficient the metabolism, and thus the less expensive to convert maize and soy into animal protein. All this ultimately is reflected in the price paid by the urban consumer. The increase in consumption leads to a variety of chicken products available in supermarkets and restaurant chains as part of a fast-food culture that is usually less expensive than beef and pork.

However, the relative efficiency in comparison to beef and pork should not mask the huge environmental and animal-welfare/rights impacts caused by the massive transformation of living sensitive creatures into food. The environmental impacts extend far beyond the excremental pollution of water and air. They include forest depletion, eutrophication of rivers and coastal regions, contamination by pesticides, other sources of greenhouse gases related to the preparation of grain fields by heavy machinery, and a series of negative impacts involved in the processing of meat in slaughterhouses and the energy required to freeze chicken meat for preservation and transportation. The animal-welfare/rights cost is huge too, considering that there are more than 25 billion chickens in the world today, most of them living in miserable conditions, in overcrowded factory farms, or CAFOs, living short lives of about six or seven weeks and suffering chronic pain caused by an accelerated growth that is not suited for their fragile skeletal and physiological conformation.

Considering the magnitude of this issue with its global cultural, economic, and environmental implications, it deserves to be investigated more thoroughly and in more contextualized settings to discover how the transformation of the backyard and marginalized chicken came about. What were the political, economic, and environmental factors and actors that facilitated the process? In what specific social and ecological settings did the core regions of chicken meat production in the world develop? What are the specificities of Paraná in this global phenomenon and what were the consequences? Therefore, the proposal of this research project is to investigate this historical transformation in one of the core regions of chicken meat production in the world, the state of Paraná in southern Brazil, during the Green Revolution (1960–80), when this process evolved and accelerated.