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*Published in:*  
Gastronomica

2020

*Document Version:*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Kollnig, S. (2020). Chicken for Everyone? A cultural political economy of the popularity of chicken meat in Bolivia. *Gastronomica*, 20(4).

*Total number of authors:*  
1

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# Chicken for Everyone? A Cultural Political Economy of the Popularity of Chicken Meat in Bolivia

**Abstract:** Over the last fifty years, the production and consumption of chicken meat have soared in Bolivia. This article analyzes the political, economic, and cultural developments that have led to the popularity of chicken meat in this country. It also asks who has benefited from this success story. The author relies on data from one year of multisited ethnographic fieldwork in Bolivia to provide an account of the history of industrial chicken meat production in the country. This article particularly focuses on the role that national elites and their political entanglements have played in the development of the poultry sector.

Marketing campaigns playing on desires to join Western modernity have fostered a taste for industrial chicken meat. Constant overproduction has kept market prices low, so that chicken has become available for the masses. The supply of cheap chicken meat also has been on the political agenda. This article concludes that the expansion of industrially produced chicken meat has mostly favored the upper and middle classes, leaving the poorer population with products that are cheap but of doubtful quality. Under the guise of a “sovereign” supply of cheap meat, an immense business opportunity has been created.

“WE ARE INVADED BY CHICKEN,” an interviewee in Cochabamba told me. Another said, “We consume so much chicken that we will all grow wings eventually.” Chicken meat is the cheapest and most consumed meat in Bolivia. According to the Ministry of Rural Development, in 2014 the average Bolivian consumed about 36 kg of chicken meat (Pagina Siete 2015). In the La Paz region, chicken meat consumption rose to over 60 kg per capita per year (ibid.; ADA Cochabamba 2015), which is higher than the average per capita consumption in the United States (International Poultry Council n.d.). Industrial chicken meat production began in the 1960s in Bolivia, when most families were still rearing chickens in their backyards. Since then, the sector has been growing constantly. Measured in tons of meat produced, chicken meat production in Bolivia surpassed beef production in 2006 (Ormachea Saavedra 2009).

The growing importance of chicken meat as a cheap protein source is a global phenomenon (Magdelaine, Spiess, and Valeschini 2008). In Latin America and Asia, the growth rates of this sector have been particularly high. This article analyzes the conjuncture of cultural, political, and economic developments that have made this success possible in the context of Bolivia. I also ask who has benefitted from this development. While the biggest chicken producers claim to be changing the diet of Bolivians for the better (ADA Cochabamba 2014), malnutrition and food-related diseases, particularly

obesity and diabetes, abound in the country (La Razón 2017; Los Tiempos 2016b).

The most recent increase in industrial chicken meat production has taken place in a unique political context for Bolivia and the world: in 2005 Evo Morales, the country’s first president identifying as indigenous, won the general elections. He and his Movimiento al Socialismo (Movement for Socialism; MAS) have been in power until recently; in autumn 2019 Morales resigned amid unrest after the general elections. The country was left in a situation of conflict fueled by century-old ethnic and political divisions.

Morales himself came into power after a period of social unrest in the early 2000s that unsettled the established governments of the time (Mesa Gisbert, de Mesa, and Gisbert 2012). With more than thirty indigenous nations living in Bolivian territory, about half of the country’s population identifies as indigenous. Despite this importance in numbers, indigenous peoples have been marginalized in Bolivian society since colonial times. Morales brought the struggles of the indigenous population to mainstream politics. Presenting an anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist, and pro-indigenous agenda, the Morales government promised change.

But critical voices soon became louder, denouncing the lack of improvements in material living conditions and in the political representation of indigenous peoples. The indigenous

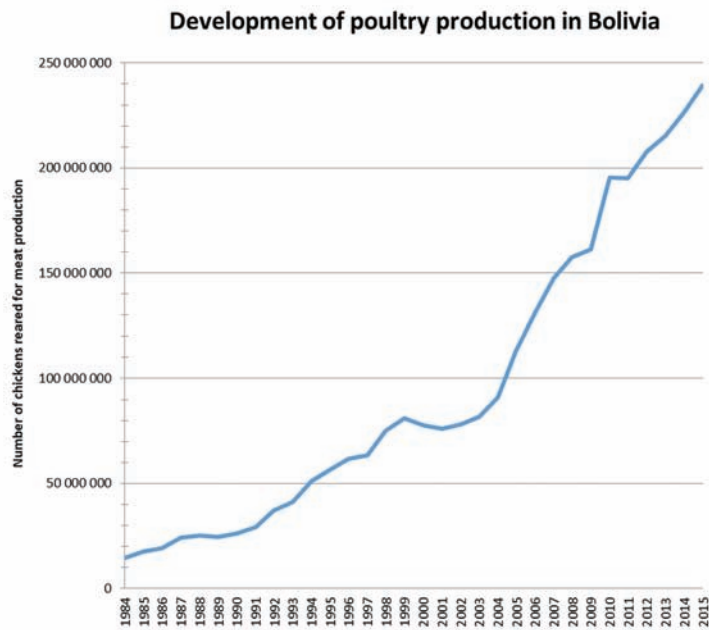


FIGURE 1: *Number of chickens raised for meat production in Bolivia, 1984–2015.*

DRAWN BASED ON DATA PROVIDED BY THE MINISTRY OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND LAND, DEPARTAMENTO DE INFORMACIÓN Y SOPORTE TECNOLÓGICO, 2015

population continue to be excluded from political fora such as the drafting of the new constitution, and repression against indigenous peoples in conflicts around land and resources, such as the TIPNIS highway project, are part of everyday politics (Rivera Cusicanqui 2014). The agricultural sector reflects many of the sources of discontent with the Morales government. Nongovernmental organizations have criticized the continued support for the Santa Cruz agrarian elites and the expansion of export-oriented industrial agriculture, both of which reinforce the marginalization of small-scale farming (Fundación Tierra 2015). The growth of the poultry industry outlined here helps to illuminate these problematic developments, which persist even after the end of the Morales administration.

## Methodology

The account of the emergence of the Bolivian poultry sector provided here is based on one year of ethnographic fieldwork carried out between mid-2015 and mid-2016. I collected material in a range of sites and situations related to poultry production, distribution, and consumption. This involved a departure from the traditional ethnographic focus on one field site toward what Marcus (1995) calls *multisited ethnography*.

Marcus proposes this kind of ethnography as a way of following the unfolding of cultural processes. Particularly in interdisciplinary fields, such as food studies, it has become

more important to take into account the different sites and actors involved throughout the commodity chain. Following chicken meat in Bolivia is a case of “following the thing” (Marcus 1995: 107) in its circulation in society. Inspired by Marxist world-system theory but also open to postmodern influences, multisited ethnography has a particular focus on system-lifeworld interactions. Thus, it can bring out unequal relations between different actors and sites.

As Marcus (1995: 106) states, different sites require different methods, as is also reflected in the different methods applied in the research at hand. It is particularly apparent that working with different actors involves varying degrees of formality in terms of methods, from informal participation in everyday situations to structured surveys. Marcus also emphasizes that moving between field sites situates the researcher politically. Working with different actors makes power relations between them tangible to the researcher, thus inevitably politicizing the research experience and process.

My fieldwork for this specific project entailed moving between sites related to poultry production and locations of distribution and consumption. Oftentimes the actors at one location were in opposition to the actors at another. Geographically, the research involved primarily the urban areas of Cochabamba, Santa Cruz, and La Paz.

On the production end, I conducted participant observation and semi-structured interviews at two chicken farms and

one feed mill and attended the meetings of the small farmers' association, ASPYMAD (*Asociación de Pequeños y Medianos Avicultores Departamentales*; Association of Small and Medium-Scale Poultry Producers). I interviewed the head of the ADA (*Asociación de Avicultores*; Association of Poultry Producers) Cochabamba as well as an official of the powerful CAO (*Camera Agropecuaria del Oriente*; Eastern Agrarian Chamber) in Santa Cruz, representing large-scale feed producers. Apart from interviewing ministry representatives in La Paz, I also spoke to representatives of the development bank that finances poultry farming projects. Moving between physical sites—from chicken farms to government offices—but also between locations of power, I was able to construct a detailed account of the workings of poultry production in Bolivia. The contradictions and additional questions brought up by the different types of data collected allowed me to locate the key issues at play within the poultry sector.

With regard to distribution and consumption, I similarly engaged with different actors and field sites, from markets to family kitchens. I conducted a survey among market women selling chicken meat as well as among vendors at more formal sales outlets. In everyday life I participated and observed the interactions at markets and in the homes of friends and family. I interviewed representatives of EMAPA (*Empresa de Apoyo a la Producción de Alimentos*; Government Agency for Food Production) and SENASAG (*Servicio Nacional de Sanidad Agropecuaria e Inocuidad Alimentaria*; the Bolivian National Agency for Agriculture and Food Safety), gaining insights into how the government interacts with the distribution and sales of chicken. This multisite approach, using a certain flexibility in terms of research methods, allowed me to bring together different data types. This process of triangulation resulted in an in-depth account of the Bolivian poultry sector.

### Linking Food Production and Consumption

The importance of analytically connecting food production and consumption was forcefully brought forward by Goodman and Du Puis (2002), who argued that only such an approach can lead to a more progressive food politics. Traditional studies of food items have been criticized for depicting the consumer as passively molded by market forces (Dixon 2002; Goodman and Du Puis 2002). Together with a greater interest in the analysis of culture in sociological studies, the consumer has recently been accorded a more important role (Goodman and Du Puis 2002). This interest has been creatively developed in different directions, such as the translation of economic value into meaning and vice versa (Guthman 2002), links between local food markets and tourism (Cohen and Avieli 2004), food

producers' meaning-making as related to a products' political economy (Paxson 2011), and the ecological embeddedness of food from production to consumption (Feinberg, West, and Brockington 2011).

Influenced by the systematic and rich accounts of the political economy of chicken by Dixon (2002), in the Australian context, and by Striffler (2005), who analyzed the US poultry sector, I follow chicken meat from production to consumption. Such a holistic and multifaceted approach is necessary to make sense of the data collected from different sites and actors through multisited ethnography. Only an approach that links rather than isolates different aspects of the commodity chain can bring out the unequal power relations at play in the Bolivian chicken meat sector.

Previous studies of industrial poultry production in Latin America (Martinez-Gomez, Aboites-Manrique, and Constance 2013; Belusso and Hespanhol 2010; Lozano and Arias 2008; Teubal 2005) provide important insights regarding the production side of the industry. The approach applied in my work, however, is more directly aligned with critical anthropological studies of food production and consumption in Latin America, particularly the studies of Andean food culture by Weismantel (1988), Orlove (1998), and more recently Paulson (2006). Richard Wilk's cultural economy of food (e.g., Wilk 2006) is another important influence. These studies aid in understanding the rich and complex cultural context of food in the Andes and Bolivia, while at the same time seek to situate cultural phenomena in their political-economic context.

I analyze the linkages between different sites and actors through the lens of a *critical cultural political economy*. I rely on Sayer's argument (2001), which states that cultural political economy has to look critically at the interactions between systemic and sociocultural aspects. Drawing on Habermas (1984), Sayer makes a distinction between *system* and *lifeworld*. The *lifeworld* is the world of people's everyday informal interactions: it is everyday agency embedded in a cultural context. While Habermas focuses on communicative interactions taking place in the *lifeworld*, Sayer adds the importance of our socialization into a cultural context. *Systems*, particularly the economic and bureaucratic systems, work in ways that are often detached from our everyday experiences. Still, they influence the *lifeworld* by shaping and limiting agency. Examples are bureaucratic decisions that affect admissions to schools, or that impact economic developments directly linked to people's lives and livelihoods. Following Habermas, *systems* have increasingly colonized the *lifeworld*, structuring everyday life more and more according to the logics of economics and bureaucracy. Sayer adds that not only do *systems* influence the *lifeworld*—the former also *depends on* the latter. In our everyday interactions, we



FIGURE 2: Map of Bolivia with the location of the main study site, the city of Cochabamba and its surroundings.

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reproduce, mostly unconsciously, the workings of the systems. Interactions at a workplace or even in personal relationships reproduce systemic logics, such as the dominant logic of efficiency (Sayer 2001: 689).

The analysis presented in this article follows this theorization, showing that the emergence of the Bolivian chicken sector has depended not only on the actions of individuals but also on a historically developed political system. The material presented also reveals that the interactions between system and lifeworld produce winners and losers, in this case systematically benefiting Bolivian elites.

Thus, there are social inequalities built into the cultural political economy of food, in Bolivia and elsewhere. This argument ties into the debates surrounding *food justice* and *food sovereignty* (see Alkon and Agyeman 2011; La Via Campesina 2011). While the food justice movement has mostly focused on food consumption, food sovereignty brings

in issues related to production (Cadieux and Slocum 2015). In linking production and consumption, I bridge the concerns of these movements. As will be shown, inequalities in food production and consumption are intimately related.

## The Cultural Political Economy of Chicken Meat

### AN EMERGING INDUSTRY

In Bolivia, industrial poultry production started in the 1960s (Landivar 1996), and in the early 1970s, Associations of Poultry Producers (*Asociacion de Avicultores*; ADA) were founded in the cities of Cochabamba and Santa Cruz. Bottom-up associations comprising various economic actors, from soy producers to coffee vendors, are important in the Bolivian context, and in this tradition, ADA would come to play an important political role as well. A document compiled



by ADA Cochabamba, celebrating its fortieth anniversary, provides insight into the lives of the “founding fathers” of poultry production in Cochabamba (ADA Cochabamba 2014).

The “founding fathers” were five men, all part of the white upper class of Cochabamba city. All of them have held important political positions throughout their careers. One of the most influential members was the founder and director of the transporters’ association, a traditionally powerful group, when he joined the poultry producers’ association. A few years later, under the Banzer dictatorship (1971–78; Mesa Gisbert et al. 2012), he was installed as the mayor of Cochabamba city. In this position, he helped his friends from ADA to establish market stalls for the sale of chicken meat and eggs.

At the time when the ADAs and the sector of industrial poultry production were emerging, Bolivia was ruled by a series of military dictatorships. Starting in 1964, after a period of conflicts between left-wing and conservative political elements, a new generation of military officers took political power in Bolivia. Also molded by influences from the United States at that time, these officers were averse to democracy and labor movements but sustained the support of the peasantry in a populist fashion. In their attempts to “modernize” the country, the various dictators formed alliances with the Bolivian elites. The period of dictatorships ended in 1982 after a severe economic crisis (Klein 2011: 220–32).

In 1973 ADA Cochabamba elected a political heavyweight as its president, who remains in the position to the present day. He has founded, and played leading roles in, a range of private and public institutions. He was, among other functions, vice president of Cochabamba’s association of private entrepreneurs and also functioned for several years as the director of the agricultural bank of Bolivia. His work reveals a sustained and successful effort to influence government politics. Personal connections were highly important: As he told me, the minister of agriculture under General Banzer, a former schoolmate of his, facilitated the installation of the first chicken hatchery plant in the Cochabamba region.

Industrial poultry production developed most successfully in the Cochabamba and Santa Cruz regions. As the history of the ADAs shows, the elites in these regions had the financial means to invest in poultry production—or, at the least, guaranteed access to bank loans. Personal connections to the military-political conglomerate that was governing the country helped in this process. Particularly the Santa Cruz region was favored in terms of infrastructure investments based upon the political agenda of developing large-scale agriculture there (Albarracín Deker 2015). Environmental factors have also been important:

In comparison to the Andean highlands, where Bolivia’s political capital, La Paz, is located, the Cochabamba region in particular has favorable climatic conditions for chicken rearing. Altitudes are less extreme and the climate is more temperate. The Santa Cruz region, being the center of agricultural production, has always competed with Cochabamba for the bulk of poultry production. With the establishment of new technologies allowing for successful poultry farming in the tropical climate of Santa Cruz, this region has caught up considerably in recent years.

Relationships between the ADAs and the government have not been free of conflict. Many times, the poultry producers have been let down by the government, for instance when emergency feed supplies were halted at the Bolivian border in the early 1970s. One of the founding fathers recalls that, when poultry producers learned that government officials were selling corn destined for feed to Peru, they traveled to the corresponding ministry in La Paz. When the minister did not want to receive them in his office, one of them “forced the door open, and we all entered at once” (ADA Cochabamba 2014: 21). In times of military dictatorships, such behavior could only have been tolerated coming from people with good connections in high places.

The above incident shows that, despite the occasional argument, the elites controlling the bulk of poultry production do not threaten established power relations but rather reinforce them. They have remained in a relatively protected position because their agency props up century-old political-economic power relations. As long as economic activities are controlled by the elites, the hegemonic system built upon colonial patterns continues to be unthreatened.

It has been easier for the poultry producers’ associations to resolve problems with political authorities than to deal with situations of popular protest. This came to light most clearly in 2000, when the Cochabamba “water war” took place. In reaction to governmental plans to privatize the water supply in the Cochabamba valley, the population of the entire region mobilized at the beginning of 2000. The protests that brought together urban dwellers and farmers from the surrounding areas continued for three months before the privatization plan was brought to a halt. This “water war” has become iconic in the local memory as well as globally as a case of successful popular resistance (Shultz 2009). The protest, which was followed closely by further waves of mobilization (Mesa Gisbert et al. 2012), presented an obstacle to the circulation of feed and chicken meat. The poultry producers stood up against these “unyielding and irrational” protests, filling the *plaza* in front of the governor’s office with dead birds (ADA Cochabamba 2014: 53). While the governor arranged for a possibility for

feed transports to pass the road blocks and protests, the people still would not let the trucks pass (ADA Cochabamba 2014). The poultry producers had to wait for the conflicts to end. This underlines the notion that the elites united in the ADAs stand by those in power, and that the population is quite aware of this relationship.

While the ADAs represent the biggest and most powerful poultry producers that are well aligned with political power, they do not effectively represent small- and medium-scale chicken producers. Those producers have, over the last ten years, founded their own associations, although they lack a direct contact to power, even under the “indigenous” Morales government. The president of ASPYMAD (*Asociación de Pequeños y Medianos Avicultores Departamentales*; Association of Small and Medium-Scale Poultry Producers) told me, “With great hope, we saw an indigenous government, of the people; hopes that have disappeared.” The small producers are particularly concerned about the continuously low market price for chicken meat and the lack of support for larger investments. At meetings with government institutions, I witnessed that the small producers were not taken seriously and their initiatives were stifled by bureaucratic and financial hurdles. Calls for regulation of the market price for chicken meat have been ignored by the government, and attempts to commercialize the chicken meat directly through the small producers’ association were met with government requirements for high tax payments. Associations like ASPYMAD have to make themselves heard through protests such as road blocks and through media reports. So far, these actions have not led to concrete improvements, because the farmers associated through ASPYMAD are considered intruders who threaten the political-economic establishment controlling the agricultural sector. They will invariably struggle against the actions of elites intent on the control and containment of their activities.

Lack of political support and economic domination by bigger producers have led to many bankruptcies among the members of ASPYMAD. Many smaller farms have become either economically dependent on bigger producers, producing for them on the latter’s terms, or they have been bought out by the big players. As the owner of a feed mill outside Cochabamba put it, “For a big producer to become big, thousands of others have to go out of business. This is how it works.”

#### AN EMERGING MARKET

When the poultry industry was emerging in the 1960s and 1970s, most Bolivians were rearing chickens in their backyards. These chickens were raised in anticipation of special festivities, such as a birthday or Christmas. Many people told me

that they used to connect eating chicken meat with special occasions. My urban, middle-class interviewees remember raising chickens up until the 1980s, when the municipality of Cochabamba city banned urban animal rearing for sanitary reasons. The lifeworld practice of chicken rearing was being restrained in parallel with the commercialization of this very practice by the poultry industry.

Chicken did not use to be a basic everyday food item for Bolivians, but the founders of industrial poultry production had the idea that chicken meat would resolve problems of hunger and malnutrition in Bolivia. One of the founders of ADA Cochabamba stated, “I decided to enter into poultry production so that my people could consume chicken, so that they won’t be malnourished or dying of hunger” (ADA Cochabamba 2014: 22). In the introduction to the pamphlet celebrating forty years of ADA Cochabamba, the long-standing president of the association writes that the poultry industry has “effectively and permanently contributed to regional development and to the substantial improvement of the nutrition of the Bolivian people” (ADA Cochabamba 2014: 5). One pioneer of chicken production allegedly got the idea about the nutritional importance of chicken meat from foreign visitors to his hotel (ADA Cochabamba 2014). Even international bodies such as the Food and Agricultural Organization have argued for the importance of poultry products for the nutrition of the population, particularly in developing countries (Marangoni et al. 2015). Thus, industrial poultry production was introduced to Bolivia, driven by a mainstream vision of food security that aimed to supply sufficient food for the population. The local circumstances and traditional agricultural system were disregarded in favor of a one-size-fits-all development plan.

In close connection with the emergence of the industrial poultry sector, Bolivian politicians started to see an increased consumption of chicken meat as important: the “Decennial Plan 1962–71” planned for an increase of the per capita consumption of chicken meat from 5 kg to 20 kg (Albarracín Deker 2015). The continuous increase of poultry production is revealed by agricultural census data, which shows that, while in 1950 llamas and sheep dominated the population of farm animals, in 1998, 90 percent of the farm animals reared in Bolivia were chickens (Albarracín Deker 2015: 29–30).

Data from ADA Santa Cruz show that, in the beginning, production was growing more rapidly than the demand for chicken meat. From 1978 to 1979, production grew by 75 percent, leading to a steep decline in the market price for chicken meat (Landivar 1996). This situation, as reports from ADA Santa Cruz reveal, was countered with intensive marketing campaigns. In Cochabamba, the producers’ wives started

initiatives to market chicken. One of them recalled: “The difficult task was to convince the housewives to include chicken meat more often in the family’s diet” (ADA Cochabamba 2014: 50). This amounts to a conscious attempt at changing lifeworld practices, in order to support a growing industrial sector in need of revenues.

Marketing has been an important component in awakening the Bolivian taste for chicken, as contemporary Cochabamba shows. The logos of the big poultry producers are omnipresent in the city. The *caseritas*, as the market vendors are called, use the brand logos on their market stalls, even if they are not selling chicken meat of a particular brand, in order to attract customers. Chicken is marketed as fitting with traditional family values. Most frequently, chicken is offered as the entire bird, for the big family, and advertisements show a happy family united around a roasted chicken. Chicken has become a successful fast food, mostly as “broasted” chicken (a technique of pressure-frying from the United States) or roasted chicken. The most successful of these fast food restaurants have evolved into chains that offer

a space where children can play as well as providing a special children’s menu. The marketing of chicken transmits the image of a modern, Western lifestyle: chicken is presented as the preferred food for the modern family that enjoys a conveniently easy prepared meal or eats outside the home in a fast food place. Famously, McDonald’s was unable to establish its business in the Bolivian food market (De Suremain 2009), but in truth, the Bolivian fast food chains look very much like McDonald’s, even down to the colors red and yellow. This desirability of a Western lifestyle finds its full expression in the fact that almost all advertisements, not only in the food sector, show people of light skin and preferably also clear eyes and light hair. Appadurai (1986) analyzes marketing as presenting a product as “desirable-yet-reachable,” and this is certainly the case for chicken. Chicken is presented as Western and modern, properties that seem desirable to many Bolivians, and one can get closer to these properties by consuming a generic Western food—chicken. In this way, consumerism plays on the values of a society structured by colonialism



FIGURE 3: Inside a fast food restaurant in Cochabamba.

PHOTOGRAPH BY SARAH KOLLNIG © 2020



and the traditional Christian family. Again, lifeworld values and practices are instrumentalized in order to benefit the political-economic system.

Despite the competition of roasted chicken and “broasted” chicken, traditional preparations such as *ch’anca de pollo* (vegetable soup with chicken meat) and *picante de pollo* (chicken with chili sauce) are still enjoyed in the family circle. Is this a protest against being flooded with generic chicken preparations? If it is a protest, it has backfired, since it is being commodified by the poultry industry. Traditional chicken dishes, such as stuffed chicken and *picante de pollo*, are nowadays offered as ready-made products by the big brands. Even preparations that originally were made with beef are marketed in their chicken meat version. These products manage to take up the preference for traditional recipes that is kept alive by many Bolivians, while giving these traditional preparations a modern image.

Concerns with the industrialization of the food system have been voiced in Bolivia as well as in the entire Latin American context, with La Via Campesina being the most visible proponent of struggles for taking back control over food production (Altieri and Toledo 2011). Within the Bolivian poultry industry, organizations like ASPYMAD have been carrying on this struggle. Negative health impacts of dietary changes, such as increasing cases of obesity and diabetes and ecological concerns, have led to consumer mobilizations as well. In the highly unequal Bolivian context, however, proponents of alternative foodways tend to be rather privileged, and the emerging market for organic food is geared toward a clientele with a higher income. Thus, even calls for changes in food production and consumption might not reach those who are most exposed to the negative consequences of the industrial food system.

Cooking is still seen as a woman’s task in Bolivia, but at the same time women have increasingly joined the workforce. Also, fewer middle-class families have housekeepers nowadays, since it has become more expensive to employ one. This creates a situation where women have less time to cook, while they are still expected to care for the family. Chicken comes in handy here, since it can easily be bought or prepared quickly. The preference for chicken as convenience food is part of the “cultural economy of convenience” (Guthman 2002: 302), which is partly driven by the integration of women into the workforce. Production is shifted to industrial farms and processing, and particularly, female wage labor is exploited in underpaid and stressful jobs in fast food restaurants. In Bolivia, particularly the distribution and marketing of chicken are characterized by female labor. The majority of market vendors and vendors in the brands’ sales outlets are women.

In the beginnings of the poultry industry, it was the producers’ wives who started to market chickens by convincing housewives to use more chicken in their diet. Thus, even in its industrialized form, the production and consumption of chicken meat reproduce gender inequalities.

#### A SYMBOL OF NATIONAL SOVEREIGNTY

Chicken meat in Bolivia currently is about one-third the price of beef. It has become a commodity that most Bolivians not only want to consume but also have the economic wherewithal to purchase. If one visits the central market of Cochabamba city around lunchtime, one sees the market vendors, squatting on the floor or a small stool in their market stalls, and eating while they attend customers. Most of them eat a meal that contains chicken meat. Proudly, the president of ADA Cochabamba told me that chicken has become so affordable that even the poorest can buy it, although the poorest end up with the cheapest parts such as the head, neck, and feet. Chicken has become the fuel of the urban poor. The minimum wage in Bolivia stands at about 260 USD per month (1800 Bolivianos), but many Bolivians work in informal labor conditions that pay much less than the minimum wage. Chicken comes in handy as a cheap source of protein. By providing cheap food for all, the system of economic exploitation can be maintained without resistance from the population.

The abundance of cheap chicken meat has become a political priority. Particularly the supply for the urban markets of El Alto and La Paz, situated in the political center of Bolivia, is of concern. In these cities, chicken meat consumption is higher than in the rest of the country. “When there are difficulties with the supply in El Alto, within one hour the vice president is here, asking to meet with us,” the president of ADA Cochabamba told me. At the time I was interviewing him, in late February 2016, there had just been weeks of massive road blocks organized by the transport sector. During this time, the government had organized transports of chicken meat with air force cargo planes to the city of El Alto.

The notion of the political importance of chicken meat has trickled down to the administrative ranks of the political system. As I was inquiring about controls in chicken farms and slaughterhouses at the national authority, SENASAG (*Servicio Nacional de Sanidad Agropecuaria e Inocuidad Alimentaria*; the Bolivian National Agency for Agriculture and Food Safety), I was told that it was difficult to take action in cases of sanitary problems in poultry production, since the population depended on the consumption of chicken meat. “There would be road blocks and protests if we closed down

slaughterhouses.” This shows that securing the basic food supply is an important factor in maintaining the population’s complicity—such as the fervent government supporters in El Alto. In recent unrests surrounding the 2019 elections, the reverse strategy of cutting food supply was used by supporters of Morales in order to contain anti-government protests (La Razón 2019).

Chicken flocks in Bolivia, as elsewhere, are prone to infectious diseases such as *salmonella gallinarum* or Newcastle’s disease. The loose sanitary regulations result in poor prevention and management of disease outbreaks. As a veterinarian at the SENASAG authority explained to me, farmers usually apply antibiotics in an uncontrolled fashion, which has led to the development of resistant bacterial strains (for more on animal health, see Kollnig 2019). The presence of Newcastle’s disease limits the possibility of exporting Bolivian chicken meat due to sanitary restrictions. It may be that this limitation of production to the internal market has reinforced the already low ambitions regarding sanitary regulations and control. As Lozano and Arias (2008) show in the case of Colombia, greater efforts regarding sanitary standards in poultry production may be driven by the desire to increase exports.

For the government, chicken has become a symbol of *national* sovereignty, since the entire demand is met by national production. This national production is also, proudly, industrial. This conviction surfaced when, in June 2016, it was published that the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation wanted to donate chickens to Bolivia in order to fight poverty. The minister of agriculture characterized this offer as “offensive”: “He [Bill Gates] does not know anything about Bolivia, he probably thinks we ... live in the middle of the jungle without knowing how to produce” (Los Tiempos 2016a). While the claim to “food sovereignty” is strong within government circles, it is indeed a supply of generic food controlled by the traditional elites.

The Morales government interfered more than had previous governments in the food sector. In order to keep the price for chicken meat low, several measures were taken. In 2011 a price range for soy, the essential feed ingredient, was introduced by the government, and around the same time the government agency EMAPA initiated a below-the-market price for the supply of corn. These supplies, however, do not reach everyone, and often, producers have to buy feed from the black market.

The actual power in determining the market price of chicken meat lies with the big poultry industries, who control the supply side through the large amounts of meat produced by them. The representative of CAO confirmed that it is constant overproduction of chicken meat that keeps the market

price low. The saturation of the internal market, and the limited possibilities for export due to the presence of Newcastle’s disease, have led to a downward pricing spiral for producers. This is particularly difficult for smaller farmers. When I visited a chicken farm in Cochabamba, the owner told me that the intermediaries who buy the chicken meat from the smaller producers force them to sell below the prices set by the big industries. The intermediaries want their own profit margin, and it is they who gain the most from these transactions. “But what are you going to do, you can’t keep the chickens around for longer, you have to sell them,” the farmer explained. This shows the precariousness of small-scale farmers in a system controlled by elites.

During my visit to a second farm in the Santa Cruz region, the farmer told me that he and his fellow farmers are trying to organize in order to plan their production cycles better. They keep each other informed about changes in supply and demand via messaging, and they have organized their own association of small producers, a sister organization of ASPYMAD. The most powerful actors, however, are still the big industries. The government has ignored demands from the organizations of small- and medium-scale producers for regulations aimed at controlling overproduction. It seems that the fierce competition on the supply side is the most convenient way for the government to ensure low market prices.

Over the years, poultry production has become increasingly cost-efficient. In the beginning, the model for poultry production was the United States. The US poultry industry served as both an inspiration and a business partner. One of the founders of ADA Cochabamba remembers that he visited a poultry farm in the US and thought, “Why not do something like this in Cochabamba?” (ADA Cochabamba 2014: 21). In the 1960s, chicklings and feed concentrate were imported from the US (Landivar 1996). This expensive enterprise started to become more profitable when soy production commenced in Bolivia in the late 1960s. The first soy processing plants were established in Santa Cruz, and also the first big hatchery plants started to operate in the late sixties (Landivar 1996). The US industry has fostered the establishment of the poultry industry in other Latin American contexts as well. Particularly the Mexican poultry industry has been strongly influenced by, and received direct investments from, US companies (Martinez-Gomez et al. 2013). In the Bolivian poultry sector, direct foreign investments have been limited, possibly due to the limited potential of the internal market. Still, the elites are internationally well-connected and strongly support the imposition of a system of agricultural production grounded in colonial thinking.

The chickens bred industrially are very different from backyard chickens, since they belong to “improved” genetic lines. These genetic lines, patented internationally, have been developed in order to attain higher feed conversion rates. Nowadays, chickens are raised faster than ever before, within forty-five days in Bolivia. As in many agricultural sectors, the actors in power not only interfere with culture and political economy but also with the genetic makeup of plants and animals. This illustrates the far-reaching power of food corporations.

The big poultry industries have developed sophisticated processing plants, where more durable meat products, such as cold meats or ready-made meals, are produced. This makes it easier to deal with overproduction and in turn increases profit margins. In general, as Striffler (2005) notes, developing and marketing new products has become the focus of the modern poultry industry.

Factory-farmed chicken is a thoroughly modern food item, efficiently produced for the masses. Consumer practice, however, shows that there is more to the cultural significance of chicken than its modernity. It can be argued that chicken actually manages to mediate some of the contradictions inherent in modern food consumption, which Warde (1997; in Guthman 2002: 301) calls the “four antinomies of taste: novelty and tradition, health and indulgence, economy and extravagance, and convenience and care.” Chicken can be consumed as the Western broasted chicken, but it is also the basis for preparations that have been transmitted for generations. It is said to be healthy—but who does not love the taste of crunchy fried chicken? Chicken is cheap, but it can be prepared in very extravagant ways. In Cochabamba one can find chicken of doubtful sanitary quality fried in week-old oil for very little money, or one can visit one of the most expensive restaurants of the city and find chicken in lemon-pepper sauce, accompanied by yellow rice, for fifty times the price of street food. Chicken is conveniently easy to prepare, and roast chicken bought around the corner is the salvation of many women who do not have the time to cook but need to care for their family. The versatility of chicken has been an important factor for its success. Dixon (2002), in her study of the Australian chicken market, remarked: “Chicken is popular because it simultaneously satisfies a spectrum of needs in food, from family harmony and women’s desire to nurture, to price, availability, health concerns, variety and convenience” (76). Thus, chicken meat satisfies traditional lifeworld values while maintaining the power of the elites, a constellation perfectly suited for reproducing the traditional political-economic system.

## Chicken for Everyone?

As this short history of chicken production and consumption in Bolivia has shown, the agenda of industrial poultry production was very much advanced by a select group of upper-class men and their families, who have used their political connections to establish profitable businesses. While direct foreign investment has been limited in comparison to other Latin American contexts, power relations similar to other contexts, with the concentration of production in the hands of a few big players, have developed. The big chicken industries are connected through the ADAs, which do not represent the interest of small- and medium-sized farmers. The smaller farmers have to resort to methods of popular protest in order to make themselves heard—mostly without any prospects for success. The small farmers’ associations, aiming to gain greater independence from the exploitative network of intermediaries, have started initiatives for the direct marketing of chicken meat. So far, these initiatives have been stifled by the government through onerous sanitary and economic demands that cannot be met by the smaller producers. Thus, although the Bolivian government prides itself in a “sovereign” poultry industry, the centralized production of generic food for the masses does not live up to food sovereignty as envisioned by organizations such as La Via Campesina. These organizations have been struggling for a diverse, locally determined food system that would be supported by small-scale farmers (La Via Campesina 2001).

The political and economic system in Bolivia was created in colonial times in order to favor the elites who were recognized as direct descendants of the Spaniards. This domination is reproduced in the poultry sector. Particularly through their respective associations, ADA and ASPYMAD, the Bolivian poultry producers interact with the economic and bureaucratic system. The association of the big poultry producers, ADA, has been much more successful in this interaction. In other words, in Bolivia the system is most responsive to the acts of privileged groups, while less-privileged actors find themselves struggling with little hope for financial stability. The smaller poultry producers have so far not been heard by the Bolivian government. In some instances, public protest, such as the Cochabamba water war mentioned earlier, can stall the system for a while, but more thoroughgoing change is not easily achieved. Some groups of small producers have been trying to find their way around the system, such as strategizing together regarding the market price of chicken meat, but they are usually defeated by mechanisms beyond their control. Following Sayer’s theorization, it can be said that the

producers' agencies reproduce century-old systems of political and economic domination. The small producers' associations are up against well-established mechanisms that are extremely difficult to dislodge. The much more likely result is that the smaller producers will have to give in to bureaucratic control and to the overarching demands of economic efficiency.

It is not without irony that the rich, of all people, should think about "feeding the poor." The people who started industrial poultry production had already benefited for generations from cheap or unpaid labor, for instance on the *haciendas*, large landholdings controlled by the well-off. Poultry production, above all, is not a humanistic endeavor but a business opportunity, a great plan to cater to the needs that many Bolivians did not even know they had. And the poultry producers keep benefiting from cheap labor—in their farms, factories, slaughterhouses, and restaurants. Behind the veil of a "sovereign" food supply is an immense business opportunity, and this business of "feeding the poor" reproduces the logics of mainstream development, with a white elite "helping" the poor by investing in a centrally controlled system of food production. In the end, the technological and economic progress promised by these measures is not for the benefit of the general population.

Marketing campaigns have been geared particularly toward the wealthier parts of the population and reproduce the systematic favoring of the westernized elites. Advertising sells the dream of a Western lifestyle, playing on the colonial notion that Western culture is superior to indigenous culture. I have argued elsewhere (Kollnig 2019b) that judgments of taste reproduce colonial power relations. This "coloniality of taste" works through the imposition of foreign products and taste and also through the appropriation of indigenous food products. Chicken is a case in point. Cheap chicken meat has swamped the Bolivian market, while only leaving marginal niche markets for meats that have a longer tradition in the country, such as llama meat or *cuy* (guinea pig). The marketing of chicken meat also turns aspects of the lifeworld into products, such as the continued importance of traditional meals even in wealthier families. The latest development of this kind in the Bolivian food sector is the increasing availability of organic products for a privileged population. This process can also be seen as a Habermasian colonization of the lifeworld, the progressing domination of the lifeworld by the economic system (Habermas 1984). In addition, a food system where healthy food is reserved for the elites leaves the less privileged worse off, as the food justice movement has emphasized (Alkon and Agyeman 2011: 2). Thus, even a generic commodity such as chicken meat reproduces the century-old divisions inherent in Bolivian society. This is quite evident in the Bolivian context, where social inequalities have been

maintained, or even deepened, even under an indigenous government.

In general, quality and food safety standards for chicken as generic food for the masses are quite loose in Bolivia. High-end frozen and ready-made products are geared toward the middle and upper classes. The least privileged have to make do with the leftovers—chicken heads, necks, and feet. The big poultry producers have established new, modern sales outlets that are supposed to make market vendors redundant. These sales outlets can be found, interestingly, only in the more privileged neighborhoods. The poorer population is left with chicken meat that has been stored in the open, without any guarantee that the meat is still safe to consume. In addition, many people living close to chicken farms and slaughterhouses in peripheral areas are exposed to environmental impacts such as water pollution and odors (Kollnig 2019). These spatial inequalities in the accessibility of high-quality food echo findings from the United States, where the food justice movement has brought out similar patterns of food accessibility (Alkon and Agyeman 2011: 7).

The poultry industry has turned chickens into machines. As Striffler (2005) quotes William Boyd, "the barnyard chicken was made over into a highly efficient machine for converting feed grains into cheap animal-flesh protein." Chicken farmers tend to see chickens as commodities to deliver a profit rather than living beings. In Habermasian terms, one can argue that the logics of efficiency have taken over the lifeworld activity of backyard chicken rearing.

Chicken is, so it seems, for everyone: it is easily available to all social groups. At the same time, *because* chicken has become a mass-produced commodity, the economic benefits go to a small group of the population that controls this mass production. The chicken meat boom mainly provides advantages for the westernized elites who have always been on the winning side of the Bolivian political and economic system.

### Afterword: Food Equity in Bolivia after Morales

As mentioned in the article above, Evo Morales, who had been in power for almost fourteen years, resigned after accusations of electoral fraud on November 10, 2019. Following a report by the Organization of American States confirming several irregularities in the elections, he left the country. He is currently living in exile in Argentina (previously in Mexico).

Already directly after the elections on October 20, 2019, protesters mobilized all over the country after initial accusations of electoral fraud. Clashes between pro- and anti-Morales



groups have continued even after Morales's resignation. The conflicts clearly bring out the fault lines between the indigenous and Western populations in Bolivian society. In the city of Cochabamba, Morales supporters who had arrived from the coca-growing regions and the countryside clashed with the urban population. At the same time, the urban-indigenous city of El Alto served as a stronghold of Morales supporters.

A main strategy hailed by Morales was to block food supply to the urban centers of the country. Roadblocks hindered the circulation of agricultural goods to the cities. The city of El Alto, strategically situated alongside the main entrance route to the government seat of La Paz, served as a main location to block transports toward La Paz. Food supply became an essential component of exerting political pressure.

The interim government, led by conservative politician Jeanine Añez, has initiated some political changes. International relations with the United States were resumed, while the close ties to Venezuela and Cuba established under Morales were severed. The current ministers of economy and agriculture have announced a reorientation of the agricultural market toward exports. Critical voices, including from the poultry sector, have brought forward their concerns regarding the ability to satisfy the national food supply.

The conservative interim government seems to be returning to a politics that leaves local producers more vulnerable to international competition. This reorientation has mainly been coordinated with the traditional agrarian elites of Santa Cruz, primarily soy and cattle producers.

New elections are planned for October 2020. While the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) will participate even without Morales, some known oppositional leaders have returned to Bolivia. They represent a serious threat to the left-wing MAS. These potential oppositional candidates have already announced their intentions to "redirect Bolivia's economy." This would, no doubt, mean a return to neoliberal politics. Any new government will most likely not master the daunting task of breaking the century-old political, economic, and cultural divisions within Bolivian society. This means that the situation of food producers, particularly small-scale farmers, will most likely not improve, independent of the political constellations to come. ☹

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