

CHICKEN THEIVERY AND THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

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INTRODUCTION

Chicken theft is a growing crime in America. According to the latest Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) figures, one out of every three chickens on the market is stolen (Uniford 2007) and the total cost of chicken theft to American society is over three billion dollars annually (Angleton 2008). Some sociologists believe chicken pinching is a gateway to more serious crimes such as automobile theft, burglary, and murder (Heffernan 2008).

Politicians, police, religious leaders, and talk show hosts have all presented different reasons for this crime wave, formed varying opinions as to why people practice poultry theft, and offered different solutions to arrest the expansion of an underground fowl market valued at over one billion dollars (Thomas 2008). In this paper I intend to identify the social origins of chicken thievery and discuss the two most common forms of chicken theft today. I will then present a single sociological theory that may explain pullet larceny in all three cases and offer a single solution.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Some sociologists believed that chicken thievery could be traced back to 5321 BC to a small swampy Hyborian city-state called Thukiran-Cluck based upon the translation of the country's name (Dove 2005). But there seemed to be some dispute over the translation. According to Trotter (2007) the name Thukiran-Cluck is popularly believed to be a Cimmerian phrase meaning "short legged chicken farmers" (P. 34). However other sociologists insisted that the name actually meant "feathered goat herder" or "tastes like dead toad" (Brooken and Foot 1999: 212; Mudflap 1967: 3). A Brythunian research project concluded that Cimmerian language structure allowed multiple meanings for village names to confuse invading armies in hopes they would become lost and leave (Brythunia Language Institute and Taxidermy Service 1993). Some sociologists concluded the original meaning of the village's name has been lost (Applegate, Plumdoor, and Grapeflooring 2000).

In any case, famine set in during this era. Famine, unlike what is popularly believed, does not consist of simple drought or crop failure. Famine is a condition of agricultural failure brought about by a combination of natural and social phenomenon.

The Great Famine of 5300s was brought about by two major factors: limited mode of production and a temporary shift in weather (Tonifau 1943).

First, historians believe that there was a massive regional drought during 5300s that lasted until about 5447 BC (Brooken and Foot 1999: 212; Mudflap 1967: 3). The Thukiran-Cluck community had what Smite (2000) labeled a tri-dimensional economy. In this case that consisted of three major modes of production: coconut plantations, grit farms and chicken ranches (Pile 1977).

The chicken ranches were largely unaffected by the drought. However, both coconut bushes and grit vines required large amounts of standing water to be farmed in commercial quantities, much like modern rice farms. Thukiran-Cluck technology lacked modern irrigation techniques. Unable to store or transport water, the drought resulted in the failure of both the Thukiran-Cluck coconut plantations and grit farms (Trotter 2007).

The second major factor that contributed to the famine was the Argolisian Invasion of 5318 BC. The neighboring city-state of Argolis was also suffering through the same drought. Their major mode of production was oatmeal estates (Pile 1977). The oatmeal trees required the same level of standing water as coconut bushes and grit vines, so they fared no better. Unlike the Thukiran-Cluckians, the Argolisians did not have any alternative modes of production such as animal husbandry (Trotter 2007).

However, like the Great Irish Potato Famine of the 1840s and the famous Pelion Shrimp Famine of 1973, social historians have maintained that the drought did not reduce the stores of coconut, grit, or oatmeal enough to lead to food shortages. The problem lay in the distribution of the reduced amount of agricultural products (Thomas and Hickely 1988).

Merchants in both city-states increased exportation of these commodities to higher priced markets by shipping them by caravan to the neighboring city-state Er Mow. Er Mow was mostly populated by a self anointed patrician class called the Ya Peas. This resulted in an artificial food shortage in both Thukiran-Cluck and Argolis (Pile 1977).

Faced with malnutrition and starvation, Argolisians formed raiding parties and began to ransack Thukiran-Cluckian chicken ranches within camel distance for food. They quickly developed an underground market for the excess rustled poultry. This underground market was so economically successful the Argolisians broadened their

chicken thefts to other neighboring city-states. This practice remained long after the famine had subsided (Thomas and Hickely 1988).

Many methods in modern criminal endeavors have been traced back to the tactics of these ancient chicken thieves (Smithy 1999a). For example, cattle rustlers during the late 1800s in the American West would hijack entire herds of cattle by waving large sheets of fabric to frighten the animals into moving rapidly to a desired direction. This approach reduced the number of rustlers needed to control the herd and increased the profit share for the involved cattle thieves (Tonifidello, forthcoming). Flag waving can be traced back to camel-mounted Aquilonians who started chicken stampedes by waving their kilts as they quickly rode by the open grazing fowl (Togurk n.d.).

The use of masks during the commission of crimes was first recorded among chicken thieves from the Argolisian plains during the last half of the Hyborian Age (Smithy 1999b). According to a study authored by the Program for Otus Owls Protection (POOP) the Argolisian chicken thieves were called "fowlers" and wore masks not to conceal their identities but frighten away the chicken guards (2007: 45). Smithy's (1999b) findings would support this conclusion.

Smithy (1999b) noted the Argolisian raider masks were fearsome creations, painted in such a way as to resemble the faces of a now extinct species of huge anthropoid lizards. Tonifidello (forthcoming) wrote these looters would smear rutting lizard musk on themselves before chicken raids. He felt such care in the creation of the illusion of a horde of aroused lizards on a visceral rampage evidenced the attempt to frighten the chicken guards not conceal the identity of the thieves.

According to the National Association of Poultry Protection (NAPP), chicken thievery today can be divided into two large categories: political and entrepreneurial. This distinction is important according to Smithy (1999b). Chicken thieves vary in motivation and scope of activities so they must be dealt with differently by society to control.

Political chicken thievery refers to a set of crimes perpetrated by the Chicken Liberation Unification Collective (CLUC). This is a domestic terrorist group whose agenda is to end "petty-bourgeoisie chicken farming" (Afert 2006: 76). Operatives of CLUC stage small raids of chicken farms to steal chickens and damage chicken houses.

Members of these groups are usually political minorities in the societies they occupy according to Tomklin (2003). They are usually poor, largely uneducated, discriminated against, and scapegoats of majority groups (Smithy 1999b). The ideal culture, the idyllic state of a culture (Anthem 1954), of these societies holds that all members have equal social and economic opportunities (Smocker 1984). But the real culture, what actually occurs, does not afford many opportunities to these minorities (Zigfield 2006).

CLUC propaganda pamphlets explain the purpose of these modern chicken raids is to undermine both the chicken based economy and democratic government of the society (Platey 1998) leading to an economic and political revolution. The aftermath of this revolution is believed by the raiders to empower all members of society (Afert 2006). Members of the organization say the captured chickens are released into the wild. CLUC operations account for a minuscule amount of reported chicken thefts (Tomklin 2003).

Entrepreneurial chicken thieves steal chicken for commercial reasons; they sell them for profit. This is the largest category of chicken thieves (Tonifidello, forthcoming) and the most organized (Abernathu, Worth, and Brut 1978). They account for the largest amount of reported fowl theft (Doggerty 1997). These criminal cartels are international, filching chickens from Mexico, the United States, and Canada and selling them in China and France. The leaders of these cartels, often referred to as the “Chicken Mafia” or the “Feathered Hand”, often use local street gangs to carry out the actual thefts (Tweakendack 1999a) and then capitalize upon their international business networks to sell the stolen birds overseas (Zigfield 2006).

Entrepreneurial chicken thievery is largely associated with materialistic societies having competition based economies (Tweakendack 1999b). The class structures in these societies are what Doggerty refers to as an informal caste system (1997). These types of class systems do not allow people to move up the structure from one class to another (Zigfield 2006).

Teakendack (1999a) concluded that since such structures do not offer opportunities for lower classes to achieve their material goals through the overt economy. Doggerty (1997) concluded that in such circumstances an underground economy develops to provide economic needs of the poor classes. Part of these economies consists

of the theft, transportation, and sale of stolen chickens and chicken eggs that provides food and money for the poor classes (Teakendack 1999a).

THEORY APPLICATION

Some sociologists, while acknowledging the distinctions among chicken thief types, hold both groups can be explained by the application of a single sociological theory: cultural strain theory. This theory holds people are placed under duress when society identifies a set of goals or objectives for them but doesn't provide the realistic and legitimate means to achieve those goals. Legitimate means can be defined as a law obeying or legal avenue (Thomas and Hickely 1988).

People in such a situation are then forced to become inventive to achieve their goals since they cannot access them through the means society identifies as traditional and proper (Smitz 1988). In this case, one method that a person might choose is criminal behavior. For example, a person wants an expensive car. Society's rules identify the most common manner for him to achieve this is by working hard and saving his money.

This would involve him practicing deferred gratification. He would likely attend college for four years. With that college degree he can then acquire a well paying job and afford an expensive car. There is nothing wrong with wanting to own an expensive car; the problem is the way the person chooses to achieve it. The theory takes this example a step further by assuming the person doesn't have educational opportunities, so has a slim possibility of acquiring a well paying job. The key to cultural strain theory is the social disenfranchisement of a class or group of people (Thomas and Hickely 1988).

This theory seems to apply to the historical case of the Argolisian chicken raiders. The raiders traditionally acquired their foods from the merchant class, but were unable to compete with the higher pricing of food stuffs offered by neighboring Er Mow. In accordance with the theory's assumptions, society had identified both the goals and the means of the Argolisians. These social factors realistically prevented the Argolisians from legitimately obtaining their goals. So they turned to non-legitimate means to acquire their food and supplement their income: chicken misappropriation.

This theory can also be applied to explain modern chicken snatching in America today. In both types of modern capon thievery described the thieves belonged to a disempowered group. In the political chicken thievery situation a group of people have

been excluded from political influence in a society that promises all people will have political representation. Chicken theft is viewed as a means to achieve that political power. In the case of entrepreneurial chicken thievery, the thieves are economically disfranchised members of a materialist society in which everyone is promised economic opportunity. In the modern world, stealing chickens is viewed as a means to achieve economic reward or status. Pilfering fowl is a means to social justice.

In all three cases chicken snatching can be explained as a means to acquire a socially acceptable goal. As social strain theory holds, there is nothing innately wrong with the poultry crooks' goals, their method is at issue. The solution would be to establish legitimate means of access to their goals and objectives that have been blocked from the thieves by society.

This would entail empowering neglected groups. How this is done could vary. Abernathu, Thomas, Walter Worth, and Brut (1978) suggested political inclusion of lower classes. Chapman, Albert, Lora Sims, Fredrick Austin, and Gleson (1994) support a redistribution of wealth by increasing federal income taxes. Brumbel, Able, and Lawson (2003) suggested a three-time-theft-law that would imprison habitual chicken snatchers without the possibility of parole.

According to the assumptions of social strain theory, if legitimate avenues were made available to criminals, the likelihood of criminal behavior would decrease. I would suggest Ernesto and Norton's (2005) solution: education. The politically disenfranchised in America are largely uneducated (Fructose 1999). Doggerty (1997) holds that a low education increases economic strain, prevents people from getting higher paying jobs. People adapt to this circumstance by working multiple jobs (Zigfield 2006).

According to Nogthian and Brown (2008) second jobs often prevent individuals from having the spare time to develop and pursue political interests and results in lack of political involvement. Education would economically and politically empower those people most commonly associated with chicken thievery, thus supplying them with a legitimate avenue to accomplish their goals and objectives (Chapman, Sims, Austin, and Gleson 1994). According to assumptions of cultural strain theory, the advantages of an advanced education might supply people with other options besides chicken thievery to pursue economic security or political empowerment.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have explored the social origins of chicken thievery. I identified and defined the two most common forms of chicken theft in America today. I presented a set of social conditions that were applicable to all three instances of chicken larceny. By applying social strain theory, I explained how these conditions might account for poultry theft and identified a solution.

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