Abstract

The United States is one of the top meat-consuming countries in the world, with an annual consumption rate of approximately 125 kilograms (or 275 pounds) per capita. For many Americans, meat plays an integral role in their daily lives and diets. Meat appears alongside their morning eggs as strips of bacon, as thin slices layered into their lunchtime sandwiches, or as the centerpiece of their dinners as chicken breasts. Underlying the high rate of American consumption is a robust and elaborate system of beef, pork, and poultry production practices. From the birth, rearing, and slaughter of the animal to the processing and final packaging of the meat as an item for retail sale, these production practices function out of public view and ultimately put meat on the American table. Complex and interconnected structural forces have transformed meat production from an agricultural farming of livestock into a commoditization and industrial output of meat products. This study examines that transformation through an interdisciplinary analysis of the economic, political, and social forces which formed and currently support present meat production, and discusses the socio-natural implications of the modern system on American society.