

HUMANS AND MEAT: A STORY OF LOVE AND HATE

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Abstract – Human societies are habitually omnivore and have coevolved with meat, a valuable dietary resource that has been vital to evolution and survival. This evolutionary entwinement is of a biosocial nature, whereby meat exerts several functions exceeding its nutritional role. Even nowadays, albeit less overtly, so-called ‘meat traditions’ are involved in the structuring of communities through their role in bonding as well as in hierarchical consolidation. In addition, their semiotic aspects are extraordinary. Eating meat, however, requires the killing of animals, which may be considered as a disquieting activity to the human psyche. Solutions to deal with this effect are culturally contingent. Whereas hunter-gatherers usually kill on a basis of deference, domestic societies seem to shift to a more dominion-oriented approach. In both cases, slaughter is profoundly ritualized. Postdomestic societies, however, act in fundamentally different ways, whereby the killing of animals has been confined to slaughterhouses and meat has largely become a product abstracted from its animal origin. Postdomestic praxis has been labelled as *carnism*. Yet, the information revolution has led to an increasing exposure to the practice of animal killing, creating societal upset in some consumer segments. Several trends can be identified as a result of this new paradigm, which are based on a heterogeneous set of solutions, ranging from meat avoidance to cultural contextualization, often via ‘story-telling’.

Key Words – food studies, animal killing, meat consumption, society, culture

I. INTRODUCTION

Humans and meat have a long-standing relationship, whereby the acts of collecting, sharing, and eating meat have resulted in remarkable evolutionary processes of a biosocial nature [1]. Among others, meat is involved in the structuring of communities through its role in bonding as well as in hierarchical consolidation. The diversity and profoundness of its semiotic qualities are remarkable, carrying several layers of meaning and evoking such associations as vitality and masculinity [1]. Meat not only requires contact with animals but also the killing thereof, which is an overwhelmingly disturbing activity to the human psyche [2]. Thus, there seems to be a fundamental need to embed the act of slaughter within lenient societal praxis, a process which has led to a heterogeneous set of culture-dependent solutions [3]. In current Western, self-reflective, and postdomestic societies, however, the eating of meat does not always go unquestioned, leading to a moral crisis in certain consumer segments [4]. This is of fundamental importance to the meat industry, which will need to adapt to the resulting societal trends and attitudes. Therefore, an improved insight into the underlying mechanisms is required.

II. CONCEPTUAL MODEL

When comparing the dominant formats of human societies, clear differences can be found with respect to the attitudes and practices that are related to meat-eating and the killing of animals (Figure 1). To illustrate this point, it is opportune to categorize societies into hunter-gatherer, domestic, and postdomestic societies [3, 5]. For hunter-gatherers, human-animal interactions are based on *deference* and are heavily ritualized, whereby animals are central to the existing cosmologies [1, 6]. Upon the adoption of domestication, however, a shift towards *dominion* can be seen. Yet, this process is still essentially based on respect, as animals continue to have prominent standing, based on their religious associations and ritual importance [1, 6]. Contact with animals is frequent, on an almost daily basis, although the eating of meat has become a mostly celebrative and sporadic treat [5]. A fundamental and problematic transition takes place upon transition to the postdomestic societal format, as has been the case for Western-type countries [3, 5].

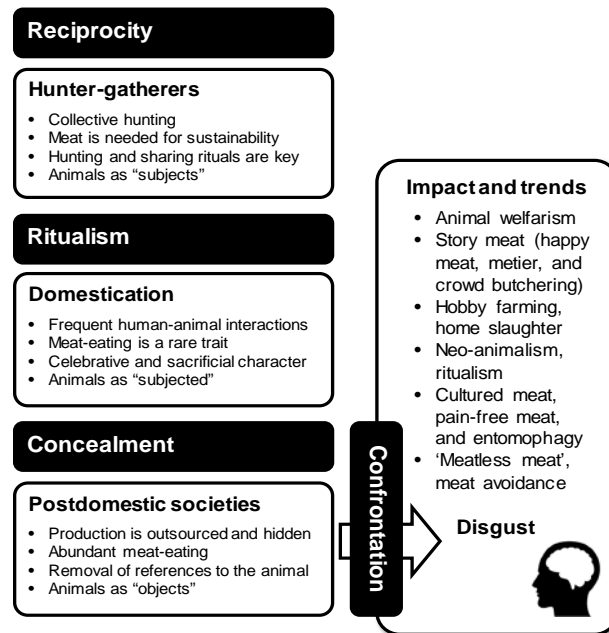


Figure 1. Overview of the position of animal killing within different cultural models, as well as the impact and trends resulting from the current moral crisis and sentiments of disgust in postdomestic societies (modified after Leroy & Praet, 2017; [3]).

In postdomestic societies, the killing of animals is hidden within slaughterhouses and social attitudes are characterized by *denial* [3]. Upon confrontation, which is catalysed by the information revolution, this may nevertheless lead to disgust and moral concern. One of the main challenges is to better comprehend why the act of animal killing has become so problematic, besides other (moral) objections to the environmental, economic, and nutritional aspects of meat-eating [3]. Regardless of this sharp rise in moral aversion, postdomestic societies are still very fond of meat-eating, whereby it is striking to note that meat production has become 'deritualized' and adjusted to an economic rationale. In other words, meat has become a commodity in a process known as *carnism* [7]. This is of course a very ambivalent situation, characterized by cognitive dissonance, and which has been coined as the 'meat paradox' [8]. Carnism is mostly at play in subjects that perceive meat as *natural*, *normal*, *necessary*, and *nice* [9]. In contrast, certain consumer segments are highly sensible to the issue and are evolving towards other coping strategies [3], which will be outlined below.

III. POSTDOMESTIC TRENDS

Alternatives for the conventional attitudes towards animal-killing in postdomestic societies encompass the request for increased animal welfare, the rise of 'story meat', home slaughter, neo-animalism, and ritualism, the development of cultured or pain-free meat, the demand for meatless meat, or just plain meat avoidance (Figure 1). Some of these alternatives are discernible since several decades, whereas others are more recent or even futuristic. The exact numbers of the respective adherents are nevertheless undefined and future research should aim at quantifying their impact.

A first important and wide-ranging societal effect is the call for increased animal welfare, which is known as the perspective of the 'compassionate carnivore' or 'conscientious omnivore'. Adherents assume that animal life needs to be protected against suffering, without however overstating this and without giving up meat-eating [10]. This trend clearly has a tangible impact, witnessed by the range of measures that are being adopted by the food industry, for instance by trusting on labels and 'animal welfare advisory committees' [11].

In the last decades, an increasing demand for reassuring story-telling has emerged. This is, for instance, reflected in the rise of 'happy meat'. The latter is basically a neo-romantic demand for expounded welfarism, somewhat naively relying on bucolic images of grass-fed or free-range animals [11, 12], whether or not representative for actual practice and often exposed as 'boutique behaviour' or even 'agricultural pornography' [13]. In the United States this is not taken lightly, as nothing less than rural 'American' values seem to be at stake [14]. Within the same framework, gastronomic discourses on 'heritage' animals further underline the apparent longing for a lost innocence [3].

A minority of consumer seeks to confront the killing process, for instance by visiting an abattoir or by participating in slaughter [13]. Home slaughter represents a way of getting back in touch with tradition and assuming responsibility for the act of meat-eating rather than outsourcing it to factory-farming [12]. Some advocate a much closer engagement with the process of animal killing, as to eradicate sentimentality and ignorance and thus tackling the postdomestic crisis at its root [12, 15].

In a more radical approach, some consider the killing of animals as a necessity to affirm the ‘natural order’ of our omnivore humanity, which should preferably be (re)accompanied by ritual [16]. This attitude may even lead to a neo-animalistic use of elements that would reflect regained Pleistocene-like behaviour, including the all-age exposure to butchering scenes and the rehabilitation of hunting and celebrative meat-eating [17]. Contemporary hunters, for instance, habitually embrace ceremony and refer to an authentic return to nature, a less problematic mode of being human, and a deep sense of respect to the animal being slain [12]. Ritualization of animal killing will likely be on the rise in Western countries, also paralleling the mounting importance of Islam according to which ritual slaughter aims at humanizing the act in an open community setting and consecrating it to the divine [18].

A very different strategy relates to the use of biotechnological innovation for the setting up of industrial meat production systems that would no longer require the slaughter of animals. Currently, the culturing of meat in the laboratory based on myoblastic cell lines is being explored and developed [16], but still faces some considerable challenges of economical and sensorial nature or due to unfavourable consumer perceptions [19]. Alternatively, genetic engineering could be used to fabricate Cartesian-type animals without the capacity to suffer, resulting in ‘pain-free meat’ [20]. In a milder form, the use of animals that are naturally perceived as non-sentient may be envisaged, such as in the case of entomophagy [21].

The removal of pain and suffering may arguably be an acceptable solution to many, but not to those believing in the idea that animals have an interest in being alive [13]. The phenomena of both moral vegetarianism and veganism are of course not new but seem to be on the rise despite the scepticism of an omnivore majority. Of the one-fifth of the global population that never eats meat, only 5% may be vegetarians by choice [22]. In Western countries, deliberate meat avoidance is estimated at 3-8% and on the rise since the last decades [22]. Certain ethical stances claim that veganism is the only consistent option as we are killing for a food we do not need [13], in contrast to other views that do not want to dismiss the act of meat-eating as irrelevant, based on its biological and social importance [12]. It is indeed noteworthy that vegetarian substitutes so often consist of imitations of meat products, such as nuggets, burgers, and sausages. The topic of ‘meatless meat’ is therefore not only of interest to scholars [23, 24], but also becoming increasingly important and relevant from a market perspective [25].

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Till fairly recent, at least from a historical point of view, the psychologically disturbing act of animal killing has always been effectively integrated in societal praxis. Currently, increased exposure of postdomestic meat production systems could result in either an increased repression via carnism or, more likely, further activate alternative responses. From the potential set of societal solutions, increased animal welfare measures and meat avoidance are the most prominent ones, whereas ‘meat-narratives’ are expected to be further on the rise.

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