

Humanity and Butchery

by Coline Salaris

At a time when animal suffering is being denounced with increasing force and meatless diets are becoming more common, how can we explain the continued existence of a carnivorous humanity that is neither natural nor rational?

Reviewed: Florence Burgat, *L'humanité carnivore* (Paris: Seuil, 2017), 480 p., 26 €.

Meat-eating as an institution

In recent months, videos of poultry and other animal slaughterhouses issued by the Association L214¹ have been a regular feature in French current affairs, prompting lively public debate on philosophical issues relating to meat consumption. In a context where current agricultural and dietary models are being challenged on a more global scale, this book by philosopher Florence Burgat contributes to renewing this debate. Her essay is part of the tradition of animal philosophy,² which seeks to understand how the separation between the human and animal conditions was progressively constructed, and proves as rich as it is disturbing.

1 A non-profit association founded in 2008 around moral issues relating to animals, to their recognition as sentient beings, and to developing veganism.

2 See, for example: Florence Burgat, *Liberté et inquiétude de la vie animale* (Paris: Éditions Kimé, 2006) and *Penser le comportement animal* (Éditions Quæ, 2010).

The author's approach stems from an intellectual and scientific frustration with the fact that there is something that has yet to be thought through when it comes to humans eating meat. According to Florence Burgat, this shortcoming is the result of the limitations facing analyses in the discipline that usually examines this diet, i.e. cultural and religious anthropology:

The choice to eat meat [...] is only dietary and culinary on a secondary level and yet almost all analysis has focused, on the one hand, on nutritional aspects and explanations of a materialist nature and, on the other hand, on cultural and idealistic perspectives. This is because, despite the fact that both anthropologists and sociologists underline the singularity of meat-eating, from the outset it is confined to a sphere of practices and representations in which animals are only worth thinking about insofar as they are worth eating. (p. 356).

This book therefore offers a more comprehensive approach to meat eating, which goes beyond understanding animals as a simple culinary object and re-examines the original relationship between humans and animals.

Looking beyond or beneath explanations such as hunting for food resources, cultural customs, or the nutritional requirements specific to a particular region, climate, or lifestyle, the aim here is to understand the reasons underpinning why the fact of meat-eating has become an institution (p. 16).

For Florence Burgat, there is nothing inevitable about humans eating meat. Meat-eating is an institution, that is to say something constructed as natural on the basis of a progressively established practice. Throughout the history of humanity, the power of this institution has progressively imposed a dividing line between humans and animals. According to the author, eating meat is therefore not a dietary habit like any other but 'aims first and foremost to normalise a certain kind of relationship to animals, which in turn defines humans (and animals) in terms of the division between those who eat and those who are eaten. The specificity of this way of using animals ensures its continued existence [...]' (p. 360).

Through the historical construction of law – i.e. the creation of a legal framework, of laws and regulations, to frame humans' relationships with one another and their actions in society and on their environment – animals acquired the status of objects rather than sentient beings. This legal process therefore contributed to mass slaughter being considered normal and acceptable. According to the author, the institutionalisation of this original division between humans and animals lies at the very foundation of humanity's identity.

The silence around putting animals to death

To develop her ideas, Florence Burgat deconstructs the arguments regularly used to justify meat eating. To her mind, they all fail to address the essentially violent relationship between humans and animals.

First, taste – we eat meat ‘because it tastes good’ – is inadequate as an argument. Other kinds of ‘meat’ – human flesh, for example – are said to taste good and yet have always remained taboo as a foodstuff. For Florence Burgat, gastronomy or taste are therefore not sufficient justifications for the institutionalisation of a dietary practice. Our differentiated approach to human and animal flesh qua food must therefore stem from something else. Similarly, she posits that it is not valid to claim that eating meat is a physiological necessity for survival, insofar as humans can fulfil their protein requirements with other foods. Humans are therefore not naturally or physiologically carnivorous.

In this context, according to the author, eating meat is a ‘human decision’. This decision should not be understood as a specific and isolated event but rather as intellectual acceptance of the division between human beings and animals and the internalising of carnivorous dietary practices by humanity. While the hominids in the Palaeolithic era may have been carnivorous for reasons of survival, after this time, when other kinds of foods were available, it was a choice to keep eating meat. But why was this choice made? In the author’s view, humans decided to continue consuming meat because they accept that animals be put to death, and draw a form of satisfaction from it, in that it confirms the much sought after difference between humanity and animalhood.

Several factors encourage and go along with the institution of animal slaughter. First, the phenomenon is facilitated by a fundamental intellectual distinction between animals and meat:

The silence surrounding the actual putting to death is very telling, so to speak. Meat eating is not viewed as a murderous activity: meat has only ever been meat; the animal from which it derives has never been an imaginable individual; its existence is null and void (p. 358).

Meat does not feel anything nor does it say anything – and it is clearly meat that we think we are eating and not animals. In the same way, the institutionalisation of practices such as hunting or sacrifices – that bring a ‘good death’ and that Florence

Burgat deconstructs in chapters 2 and 4 – has contributed to normalising the institution of putting animals to death. Taking up Jacques Derrida’s definition of the ‘sacrificial structure’ as a ‘non-criminal putting to death,’³ the philosopher continues her explanation: sacrifice, which was initially religious before it turned into widespread and industrialised slaughter, is a mechanism that absolves the human killing the animal from guilt because this death has a sacred function. A form of denial of murder occurs. This ritual and symbolic putting to death makes it possible to create a space in which the killing is sublimated and its victims rendered innocuous; it is simply a pretext allowing animals to be put to death massively and repeatedly.

According to Florence Burgat, these arguments are all the more persuasive today because humans could do without meat, unlike during other historical periods when the remains of dead animals were the only food available in nature. Eating meat is no longer a question of survival: we have never had more freedom to feed ourselves differently (p. 25). The final chapter of the book envisages various solutions that could allow us to go beyond meat consumption. The author mentions the expansion of faux meat and legumes. It is now technically possible to produce plant-based meat or *in vitro* meat.⁴ The author remains circumspect, however, regarding the promises of cultured meat. It raises many fears and would probably not satisfy the requirements of meat-eaters. It is not natural and conjures up images of laboratory engineering, which tend to scare consumers.

Meat-eating at the intersection of the social sciences and humanities

L’Humanité carnivore is a well-documented and rigorously argued book that offers an original and particularly enriching insight into animal philosophy. It invites us to rethink the self-evident nature of meat-eating at the foundation of our humanity.

3 Jacques Derrida, ‘Eating well or the calculation of the subject. An interview with Jacques Derrida’, in Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, and Jean-Luc Nancy (eds), *Who Comes after the Subject?* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 96-119 (page 112 for citation; French-language publication quoted by Florence Burgat, p. 217).

4 See Florence Burgat and Jean-François Nordmann, ‘La viande in vitro : ‘rêve du végétarien’, ‘cauchemar du carnivore’?’, *Revue semestrielle du droit animalier* 1 (2011): 207-220 or Patrick D. Hopkin and Austin Dacey, ‘Vegetarian meat: could technology save animals and satisfy eaters?’, *Journal of agricultural and environmental ethics* 21 (2008).

The author argues her position with compelling philosophical logic, which makes it difficult to deconstruct even though certain aspects do warrant debate.

First, on a methodological level, while Florence Burgat is careful from the outset to advocate reaching beyond the varied ‘historical, geographical, cultural, and social situations’ (p. 22) of meat-eating in order to justify using the notion of ‘humanity’ more generally, such resolute generalisation can seem somewhat untenable. Such analysis cannot simply eschew the full anthropological diversity of contexts, fields, culinary significance, etc. Of course, meat-eating is widespread, cutting across civilisations, time, and space. But can we really address this issue without systematically distinguishing between different groups? And is this distinction not just as valid within a given country at a given moment as it is between cultures and civilisations? Can we really consider hunters’ meat consumption in the same way as that of an environmental activist who eats local-sourced organic meat twice a month? Can the same interpretive framework really be applied to both?

Furthermore, although, as the author suggests, sociology has perhaps placed too much emphasis on gastronomy in addressing the issue of meat consumption, as a discipline it does nevertheless take care to distinguish between the different practices and actors concerned. And this is certainly what is missing from this book, where it is sometimes hard to determine who exactly the ‘humans’ in question are.

A more in-depth study of recent changes in dietary habits – such as the rise in vegetarianism or the development of animal rights movements, whether or not they are connected to environmental movements – could also have shed further light on the author’s reflection.

Caught up in our practices

L’Humanité carnivore is a troubling book that will lead any meat-eater to question their habits. The strength of the book and its author’s ideas lie here. As the reader advances through the text, a fundamental contradiction emerges between, on the one hand, eating meat and accepting that animals be put to death and, on the other, recognising that they are sentient beings.

That being said, it may well not be possible, intellectually, to broach this question outside our own practices. For this reason, the logical foundations of Florence

Burgat's brilliant and extremely apposite arguments notwithstanding, some of the explanations provided in *L'Humanité carnivore* warrant re-examination. Rather than a desire for the spectacle of death as a reminder of their humanity, since the 1950s as slaughter became a mass industry and meat-eating became widespread, do humans not simply choose to forget and ignore reality by hiding, as the author suggests, behind the difference between meat and animals? In this regard, it is also worth recalling the lack of political and citizen reactions in the face of almost daily deaths of fellow humans at the gateways to Europe in the Mediterranean Sea. Humans certainly know how to take refuge in a powerful form of denial or cognitive dissonance: they may know but they do not want to see, for they are caught up in inherited habits and social practices. This is exacerbated by the ease with which gastronomic or culinary convictions can offer reassurance, particularly in France where culinary practices have considerable historical and sociological weight. The idea that meat provides iron and protein more easily than any other foodstuff still seems to be a widely held belief. Many people view this as a physiological truth that should override any other consideration when it comes to meat consumption. While the last two points are not, per se, philosophical arguments that justify meat eating on an ethical level, they should nevertheless be taken into account in trying to understand why this practice persists and why there is little to no collective 'moral outrage' in the face of animal slaughter.

Despite these few points of discussion, *L'Humanité carnivore* remains a remarkable contribution that has already taken up a major place in intellectual debate over recent months. Due to the strength of its conviction and the value of its ethical reflection on meat eating, it makes essential reading for any readers interested in thinking through the relationship between humans and their environment.

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