

## Chapter 2

# The Complex Identity of Meat

**Abstract** In this chapter, I summarize the previous studies on meat that have been useful for this book. Even though they support different theories, I do not find them as contradictory, but advance that each of them offers a partial contribution to such a complex matter. In the beginning, I explain the various theories of the great philosophers of the past concerning the consumption of an animal, from Plato and Aristotle to the Illuminists and Kant. However, the focus of the chapter is on texts written in the period analyzed by this book, 1900–the present. In fact, the way the philosopher Norbert Elias considered meat as a mark of human development, and the French anthropologist Claude Lévi Strauss saw meat as a mirror of society's structures are of great help to fully understand the cultural relevance of this item of food since 1900. The second part of the chapter examines how meat has culturally been analyzed as an element affecting gender roles, religious beliefs, fear of disease and psychological taboos. Finally, a section concerns studies on meat rejection, that is, vegetarianism and veganism. The short story closing the chapter focuses on the emotional relevance of studying meat.

### 2.1 The Roots of Meat in Western Culture

It is largely acknowledged that Western culture is built on the work of two Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle (Kaur 2005; Ornstein et al. 2011). Importantly, they have not laid the foundations of our culture in unison. Rather, they have created two different approaches, idealism and realism respectively, which are opposed to each other. The contrasts, mediations and interactions between these two approaches constitute the basis of every philosophical and scientific development in the Western world.

Plato and Aristotle answer in opposite ways to all the fundamental philosophical questions. They disagree on the ontological question (what is reality?), on the epistemological problem (how do humans know reality?), and on many other basic speculative issues. On the nature of reality, in fact, Plato argues that we cannot see real things, which inhabit another world. The things we see, instead, are unreal and

detached from their transcendent paradigms; conversely, Aristotle points out that material things are independent from other worlds, and may be known per se (Booth 1983). On the problem of how we know reality (epistemology), Plato says that we must start from knowing the universal forms and ideas in order to know their imitations, in a deductive way; Aristotle, on the contrary, advances that knowledge starts from sense experience, and is a posteriori, and not a priori as in Plato. This means that while with Plato we know in a more passive way, in Aristotle knowledge is an active process in which humans interpret and affect reality (Wolenski 2004).

These different approaches influence the majority of human activities, even my academic courses on storytelling. I often repeat that a story such as that of the film *The Matrix* (Wachowski and Wachowski 1999) descends from the idealist assumption that the reality we know is a representation of the ‘real’ reality; and that Michael Moore’s films perfectly mirror Aristotle’s idea that we can affect reality with our actions. No forms of storytelling may be more different than *The Matrix* and a film by Michael Moore, and this difference descends exactly from the difference between Plato and Aristotle.

Thus, the two philosophers offer different answers to all the fundamental questions, and take opposite positions when facing the most important issues of human life. As this study points out that eating meat is among the deepest questions that humans ask, I am not surprised that Plato and Aristotle also take opposite positions on meat-eating. In Plato’s (2003) *The Republic*, the main character Socrates says that the ideal city is the vegetarian one, as meat leads to war and decadence. Aristotle (1984), instead, in his *Politics*, argues that animals are inferior to humans and have no rights in front of them. The universe is built for human use, there is hierarchy between all the natural elements, animals are on a lower level than humans and thus eating meat is legitimated.

As with *The Matrix* and Michael Moore, nothing may be more different than rejecting and proudly eating meat. These two stances express two diverging philosophical paths, and not by chance many other philosophers engaged with this gastronomic and cultural watershed. Before Plato, Pythagoras pointed out that humans and animals are equal, and that reincarnation may turn a human into an animal or vice versa (Orlin et al. 2016). This led Pythagoras to vegetarianism, and to the defense of all the forms of animal life. Demonstrating a great amount of flexibility, and thus constituting a good example against any form of meat radicalism, Zeno and Epicurus were vegetarians (Spencer 1995), but in their philosophies allowed meat-eating.

It is Plutarch (2004), instead, who in the book 12 of his *Moralia* asks a fundamental question that still today divides scholars and experts: is human body created to eat meat? He does not believe it, and finds eating meat wrong both physically and morally (Spencer 1995).

Among the Christian philosophers, Augustine defends eating meat. Drawing from Aristotle, he finds hierarchy in the universe, and believes that creatures occupying lower positions exist to favor the higher ones. As a result, animals are allowed to kill plants and humans are authorized to kill animals. Moreover,

Augustine points out that trees and animals have no sense of or fellowship to humans. Thus, they can be killed (Spencer 1995; Borlik 2011).

In a letter to Henry Moore in 1648, Descartes (1927) questions whether animals have minds. Generally, he describes humans as complex systems able to reason and make speech, and animals as mechanistic creatures only obeying automatic stimuli. Thus, he underlines that animals are not conscious, and that they do not suffer (see also Francione 2004). In another essay, Descartes (1999) defines animals as animated machines. Descartes's point for meat-eating has also been adopted by contemporary philosophers such as Harrison (1989) and Carruthers (1992). Drawing on these theories, Hsiao (2015) argues that having sentience does not mean having moral status, and this allows humans to kill animals and eat meat.

Kant (1956, 1993) considers animals inferior beings, because they lack good will and are unable of discerning what is good for them. This makes them means and not ends, as, conversely, humans are. As a result, humans have no duties toward animals. Caring about them is however a good demonstration of being 'good' humans, a sort of indirect duty. In conclusion, Kant seems to allow eating meat and to encourage animal care as well (Francione 2004).

Illuminism, with its focus on rationality and control of instincts, takes defense of animals. Rousseau (1979) maintains that humans do not eat meat naturally, but because of the social roles meat is linked to. He demonstrates this theory by looking at the fact that children are not interested in meat. People (especially men) like this kind of food when adults, as they are forced by society to do so. Importantly for this book, Voltaire (1824) says that humans are not animated machines as in Descartes. Well before factory farming, the French philosopher singles out the exploiting human approach to animals that reduces living beings to a source of money and calories. This is a really relevant point for this book, which analyzes meat as a source of energy.

## 2.2 The Twentieth Century: Meat and Society

As seen so far, before the twentieth century the debate on meat was vivid and fruitful, and involved many aspects of human life and the main schools of thought of human knowledge. However, this is little in comparison to what has happened since 1900. In the period analyzed by this book, the problem of meat has become central, involving not only philosophy but also sociological, political and cultural studies, natural scientists and even novelists. Gradually, the issue of meat has also become a hot topic in popular culture, affecting the feelings of the younger generation after WWII, as mentioned in the Introduction. Magazines, newspapers, TV, radio, cinema, advertising and other media have participated and have added new perspectives to the problem of eating meat. This popularization of the problem has also meant radicalizing the various positions and dramatizing their arguments. Meat has often been analyzed as a symbol referring to concepts such as blood, death,

religion, power, and so on. This section, certainly incomplete, tries to summarize those theories that have been important to the writing of this book.

### 2.2.1 *Meat as a Part of Human Development*

Developmental theories analyze everyday people's practices and approaches as elements marking the gradual and unstoppable human development. Within this framework, food is seen as an important expression of the progression of human civilization along its history. As regards meat, this school of thought has analyzed how prehistorical humans shifted from raw to cooked meat thanks to accidental fires. Subsequently, when humans were able to control fire, they used it to cook and regularly ate roasted or boiled meat (Brewer 1978; Mennell et al. 1992; Civitello 2011). Eating cooked meat instead of raw, allowed the human brain to become bigger and more able.

The German philosopher Elias (1939) similarly considered meat linked to the human development, but from another perspective. His *The Civilising Process* (Elias 1939) is a huge and thorough account of how human beings have refined their habits over the years. For Elias, food habits and manners, specifically related to meat, are of paramount importance. In particular, Elias (1939) investigates how meat has been presented on the table over the years. In the Middle Ages, he notes, the animal was brought to the table and carved by the eaters whole, while since the Renaissance, the parts of the animal which remind us that meat was a living body (the head, tail, feet, etc.) have disappeared from the table to remain in the kitchen. The progressive disappearance of the recognizable animal from the table is for Elias (1939) a sign of development and refinement.

The detachment between animal and meat is a fundamental point in this book, as is clear in the next chapters. On this concept, Vialles (1994, 5) argues that “we have no wish to eat corpses (we are carnivores, not carrion-eaters), so animals have to be slaughtered. But we demand an ellipsis between animal and meat”. In the past, the image of a pig (or a cow, a deer, and so on) and the image of a steak were linked in both ways: looking at the pig, people knew that it was the living origin of the steak; looking at a steak, people knew where it came from. Splitting the two images is a modern need that our ancestors did not know. For example, from the Middle Ages to Renaissance, “calves’ eyes were considered the most exquisite delicacy of all” (Toussaint-Samat 2009, 94), while today they provoke disgust.

This detachment becomes linguistic for Fiddes (1991), when he says that “we do not eat cow, we eat beef; we do not eat pig, we eat pork ... It is as if we cannot bear to utter the name of the beast whose death we have ordained” (1991, 97). Certainly this does not happen in every language, but it is however a signal testifying to the progressive human embarrassment in putting together the idea of the living animal and the meat on the plate.

The British anthropologist Goody (1982) finds that the carnivorous diet has favored the development of the higher classes since the Middle Ages, because of

meat's expensiveness. However, he also sheds light on holy meat rejection. Saint Benedict's rules also involved total rejection of meat obtained from quadrupeds, and Benedictine monks did not eat meat at all. As a result, meat consumption contrasted the rich to both the poor and the holy.

Sometimes the big picture of the developmentalists risks missing the fast changes of a field always in a state of flux. Some years ago, Mennell (1986) wrote that when he started to do research (presumably in the 1970s), Elias asked him during a conference: why do the French eat offal while the English reject this kind of food and the Americans even show repugnance at it? Mennell did not find an answer either at the conference or in the following ten or fifteen years, and rightly wrote that probably there are many reasons for it. Today, the question is probably still unanswered, but probably it does not make sense anymore. In the meantime, in fact, fashionable restaurants in London or Lancaster have started to serve offal to their refined customers, and health-oriented brasseries in Paris or Marseille have provided their sanitized diners with 'clean' meat hiding its animal origins. In short, differences between countries have faded.

This episode needs to act as a warning for myself and for the readers of this book. Since the 1990s, food habits have followed the rhythm of globalization and it is really difficult to take a photograph of them that is neat and clear. Moreover, even before the 1980s, food habits have frequently changed, sometimes without a clear reason and regardless of national, class, gender or other kinds of borders. Developmental theories are of great importance for this book, as it is clear in the part focusing on the detachment between meat and the animal. However, relativizing all of this is a must. Firstly, I am aware that nuances continually change the status of things and that unidirectional answers and theories are likely to be wrong or at least partial. As a result, this book will advance many hypotheses and potential explanations, but will never impose rigid interpretations and strict truths. Secondly, and relatedly, while going through the book the readers are invited to add suggestions, alternative answers and critiques, and to build their personal books over mine. Only by doing so, will reading this book develop new views and approaches, securing even a little development in the minds of its writer and readers, and thus becoming part of the developmental process theorized by the above-mentioned scholars.

### 2.2.2 *How Meat Structures Societies*

The French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966) finds that many items of food, and meat in particular, say much about the society where they are prepared and eaten, and that "the cuisine of a society is a language into which that society unconsciously translates its structure" (Mennell et al. 1992: 9). Lévi-Strauss's (1966) most famous theory is the food triangle, a system of oppositions regarding how food is cooked. By watching the ways of preparing food of both industrial societies and the many tribes that he visited in remote places, the French

anthropologist finds three main categories: firstly, the raw, which is natural food without any transformation; secondly, the cooked, which is food that has been transformed by culture, that is, human intervention; and finally, the rotted, which is food that has been transformed by Nature.

The over-cited Lévi-Strauss's (1966) theory may be found in almost all food studies books, and it is so acknowledged that it is not necessary to explain it in detail in many cases. However, I strongly believe that here it makes sense for two reasons, which have been overlooked by many scholars that have reviewed it previously. The first one is that the opposition between raw, cooked and rotted meat highlights a new relationship between Nature and Culture, which is one of the most important points of this book. For Lévi-Strauss (1966), in fact, there is something more than the basic opposition between 'Natural', untouched food extraneous to human intervention and 'Cultural' food forged by human work. In the food triangle theory, the novelty is that even Nature may change food, producing the rotted. Thus, Nature and Culture are not two opposite poles, with the first guaranteeing the immutability of food and the second continually changing what the first did. In this new view, Nature may also contribute to changing food, and, at least in this aspect, has the same role as Culture. This differentiation has interesting developments in terms of conceiving meat, as I demonstrate in the following chapters.

The second reason why I have referred to this theory is that it highlights how differences in food preparation mirror cultural differences and may lead to misunderstanding the Other. Lévi-Strauss (1977) tells a story regarding a group of American soldiers in France in 1944; when they arrive in front of a warehouse and notice an upsetting stink, they think that the Nazis carried out a massacre of people and amassed all the corpses inside. Thus, they call higher officials to obtain permission to enter, but when they finally get into the warehouse they realize that it is only a deposit of French cheese, whose scent they were not used to. The fact that this story circulated prominently among the Americans and the French, demonstrates that prejudices between national cultures are always ready to explode, and food is decisive in these dynamics.

Interestingly for this book, the triangle is added with other categories that apply to meat: Lévi-Strauss (1966) argues that there are two different modes of cooking: roasting and boiling. The first is more "natural", because food is directly exposed to the fire. Boiling is more "cultural", mediated by the water in which it is immersed and by the receptacle that holds both water and food. The first is stronger, the second is softer. Boiled food is in fact used by many peoples for weddings, while roasted food is preferred in banquets.

In terms of meat, Lévi-Strauss (cited in Macaskill 2013) goes further and links these categories to the most extreme form of meat-eating, cannibalism. He argues that the tribes that eat enemies, roast them, regardless of directly exposing them to fire. Conversely, the tribes that eat friends or relatives eat them boiled, somehow protecting them from the direct flame. Actually, Farb and Armelagos (1980) contest this theory, arguing that it is only a generalization. In fact, the two anthropologists find that there is no connection between roasting or boiling and eating enemies or relatives, and that other tribes indifferently used to bake or smoke both relatives and enemies.

The French historian Braudel (1973) sees meat-eating as a food habit that structured some colonial societies. In the Fifteenth and Sixteenth centuries, he writes, the Europeans used to eat large quantities of meat. When they conquered new nations, they continued to eat a lot of meat even in the new colonies, regardless of the local food habits. Thus, the colonized associated meat-eating with power and wealth, and often changed their traditional food practices to look like the colonizers. Therefore, eating meat became a way to appear more powerful and rich.

## 2.3 The Cultural Meanings of Eating an Animal

Rather than seeing meat as an 'external' element contributing to the development of humanity or the structuring of communities, since the 1970s the majority of the studies on this item of food have focused on eating meat as a food practice affecting everyday lives in depth and people's cultural beliefs in terms of gender, religion, symbolic signification and psychology. This section summarizes studies concerning this perspective that are useful for this book.

### 2.3.1 *Meat and Gender*

Meat has always contributed to the constructed detachment of male from female social roles within the kitchen. Today we see male celebrity chefs who sexualize themselves through roasting meat or displaying whole dead animals on the tables of their studio-kitchens. However, it must be clear that meat as an element of gender divide has deep roots and may also be found in times and areas that are far from the Western society.

While studying the African tribes in Northern Ghana in the 1960s and 1970s, Goody (1982) noticed that while women played more relevant roles when cooking other foods, men suddenly became protagonists in the kitchen when it came to preparing meat, especially when animals were roasted. Clearly, this phenomenon may be linked to Lévi-Strauss's (1966) idea that roasting is a more violent act than boiling. In fact, Goody (1982) adds that the male familiarity with meat descends from the male familiarity with killing animals and even humans.

Starting with Goody (1982), Fiddes (1991) advances that the same happens today at home barbecues. Clearly, today in the Western society, it is more difficult to separate male from female roles, as many boundaries have been blurred. However, when Fiddes (1991) finds that women usually cook in the kitchen and men barbecue and carve animals, it is difficult to say that this is only a stereotype, given the many examples that each of us may find in their everyday life. Fiddes (1991) argues that this separation testifies to the fact that men are in charge of something when it requires particular skill and courage, and that meat is associated with these elements because of its origins in hunting, assassination and death.

Fiddes (1991) identifies the same difference in *haute cuisine*, where arrays of female assistants cut vegetables and prepare many kinds of food until the star, that is, the chef, enters the kitchen and concentrates on cooking meat. For Fiddes (1991) meat is constructed as a sexual symbol in everyday life and language. Firstly, it confers sexual drive on the men who eat it. This has little scientific basis, as meat contains zinc, which helps male fertility, but it has nothing to do with sexual energy. Instead, it has to be considered as a social construction. Secondly, men and women use meat as a symbolic word to refer to each other in their relationships. On the one hand, men describe women as animals providing meat (bird, bitch, etc.) giving the idea that they hunt, kill and eat them. On the other hand, women define men as meaty, beefsteaks or beefy in relation to their sexual appeal. Finally, both men and women agree on defining the male sexual organ as sausage (Fiddes 1991).

Meat also divides men and women in terms of consumption. Blaxter and Patterson (1983) have analyzed the diet of two generations of working-class women in Scotland. Apart from the fact that meat is usually considered an item of food more liked by men, who hardly ever eat vegetables, it is interesting that the women who are fifty involve meat in the category of 'good food', while the women who are twenty only list milk, eggs, fruit and vegetables in their personal ranking of what is good to eat. This supports the view that the approach to meat has changed over the twentieth century. In another diet analysis, Warde and Martens (1998) find that men prefer red meat, while women more often choose chicken and fish; this is also confirmed by many other studies, such as Kubberød et al. (2002), Rousset et al. (2005) and Kubberød et al. (2006), who also find that many women reject red meat due to concern about the effects on their health and bodies.

The investigation of meat as a source of gender divide has frequently been debated in post-feminist studies. Adams (2010, 2015) finds that meat has lost its origins and has become a purely commercial item. This makes it similar to women, who in Western society are often represented in a pornographic way, as detached from their real nature and instead displayed as animal bodies that men can metaphorically kill and consume. What is really important in Adams's work is that after reading her books we can see a sort of 'meat culture'. Not only does meat affect people's lives, beliefs and emotions, as we have seen so far, but it also shapes the whole human experience, permeating politics, the economy, social relationships and the entire system of human life. In this line, *Meat Culture* is also the title of a collection of essays edited by Potts (2017), which deepens Adams and other scholars' theories regarding these aspects.

### 2.3.2 *Meat as a Religious Issue*

Many religions rule on meat by banning or reducing the consumption of specific animals, often considered as sacred. Among the others, Christianity reduces the consumption of all kinds of meat, while Islam and Hebraism forbid pork and Hinduism bans beef and discourages the consumption of pork and other kinds of



meat. Certainly, these practices serve the purpose of creating difference between the believers and the non-believers (Goyan Kittler and Sucher 2011). However, they have also affected the way in which meat has been perceived by humans. In her *Deciphering a Meal*, the anthropologist Douglas (1975) explains Hebraic dietary laws in terms of meat. They have to do with the characteristics of the animals, she writes. Thus, she classifies the animals according to their holiness, characteristics, place where they live, the presence of blood in their meat, and so on. The combination of these characteristics explains, for her, why some animals are banned and others are eaten.

For Mennell (1985), by ruling on the carnivorous diet, religions have increased the embarrassment of eating meat and have opened the way to new human perspectives on animals. Finally, for Montanari (2010), the religious ban on meat also favored fish consumption. Opposed to meat, fish was considered as the monastic food par excellence and became one of the principal foods of the meatless diet. Finally, the growing popularity of Christianity led to a minor consumption of meat.

In the 1980s, the American anthropologist Harris (1985) became popular by subverting this perspective. He points out that, rather than causes, the religious bans are the effects of nutritional and environmental needs. For Harris, the various diets around the world emanate from ecological reasons. If eating a specific item of food in one area threatens the sustainability of that region, that item is excluded from that specific local diet by the dominant religion (Goodman et al. 2000). Conversely, one item of food is religiously allowed if it improves the environment, the economy or the general human and natural development of that geographic area.

As regards religious bans, Harris (1985) argues that his theory perfectly explains, for example, why cow is sacred in India and Muslims and Jews reject pork. In India, says Harris, people used to eat meat and this did not affect the environment for a long time. But when the population increased and the forests diminished, the agriculture changed. Cows became too expensive, and they were mostly adapted for the production of milk and cheese. Something comparable happened to pork in the Middle-east. Pigs have in fact a diet which is similar to the human one, while cows and goats mostly eat grass. Thus, in poor times and areas, developing pork-eating would have meant taking food away from people's mouths. Pork being succulent, the temptation of raising pigs on a small scale would survive. The religious ban from both Islam and Hebraism, the most popular religions in that area, put an end even to this desire.

Islam and Hebraism also lead to another central point regarding the links between meat and religion, that is, slaughtering. Both religions, in fact, reject meat obtained from animals slaughtered improperly. The two religions say that all the blood must be taken away from the killed animal, and that the existence of even a drop of it makes that animal impure (Goyan Kittler and Sucher 2011). As it is clear in Chap. 4, and as I have already explained in another work, this point is really relevant for this book. Nazism, in fact, propagandistically used kosher slaughter to attack the Jews, and tried to construct a right-wing vegetarianism aimed to defame the enemy (Buscemi 2016).

Sometimes, meat-eating may constitute a relevant part of a religious feast, but this is not in contradiction to the ban. A feast, in fact, is an extraordinary event, and may justify some exception to the rule. The most popular example in the Western world is the American Thanksgiving, where meat is intrinsically linked to worship (Baker 2010). Eating turkey, in this feast, moves the sense of community from the church to the home (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991). However, over the years, changes have happened, and the human perspective on Thanksgiving's turkey has mutated.

Barth (2000) argues that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, American worshippers had a really vivid idea that Thanksgiving meant eating a dead animal. Turkeys, in fact, were usually raised at home well before the feast, then killed and eaten on the day of the recurrence. This strong feeling of the living animal providing meat for the feast also explains why popular magazines used to depict images of turkey shooting, but also the humorous drawing created by Nast in which turkeys are almost humanized (Baker 2010), as I analyze in the next chapter. Barth (2000) also demonstrates how this feeling has faded over the years as people gave up raising turkeys at home. The link disappeared even further when the American worshippers started to buy pre-packaged turkeys at the supermarket.

### 2.3.3 *Meat Security*

Apart from cultural elements such as gender and religion, health concerns have also contributed to shaping and changing the human perspectives on meat, and are thus of great importance for this book. In fact, over the last forty years eating meat has frequently been associated with disease and health issues such as E. coli, avian flu, SARS, Listeria, Salmonella, and the most scaring 'mad cow'. Moreover, scientists have often warned that meat may contain large quantities of antibiotics, hormones and chemicals in general. Finally, in the last period analyzed by this book, factory farming has become widespread, along with its connections to pollution and the increase of the many illnesses relating to environmental problems.

This is not the right place in which to discuss the scientific literature on 'un-healthy meat', but the problem is also cultural and social, and many studies have faced this perspective. A part of this book centers on the bitter discovery that meat may damage our body and on the insecurity that this has caused to many meat-eaters, and thus some of these studies are of relevance for me. Stassart and Whatmore (2003) refer to food-scare in general but focus on meat in Belgium and on the new kind of fear that meat insecurity causes. Ali and Keil (2008) argue that the fact that meat poses risks has no borders and involves humanity globally.

Many works have focused on the British scandals related to food security. Mad Cow disease is certainly the most studied, and an interesting perspective is the irresponsible behavior shown by the British institutions. Reilly and Miller (1997) noted that in the beginning the media ignored the problem of Mad Cow, saying that there was no risk for human beings. They only addressed it when it was too late.

Ritvo (2005) points out that only in March 1996 did the British government change its optimistic approach and admit that the disease could pass from animals to humans.

Many scholars have underlined that institutions in general have always down-rated the importance of food in public health (Eco 1986; Warde 1997). In the case of meat, this can be taken as a form of suppression and embarrassment, due to the leading role that meat has long played in the Western diet.

The demonstration of links between meat and health having to do with culture is also in Taylor and McKenzie (2017). The authors investigate the scandal of horse meat in Ireland, Britain, France, Germany, Norway, Austria, Switzerland and Sweden, but I below show how horse meat is a frequent and distinguishing food in Sicily and other parts of Southern Europe, and eating it has never led to scandal. Taylor and McKenzie (2017) rightly ask why the media have never interrogated eating meat in general, and focus instead on the scandal inherent in a specific animal. Cantor et al. (2010) summarize the relationships between meat and medicine in the United States, and the many cases in which people's approach changed during the twentieth century.

The new technologies are at the center of ethical and health discussions. Many works on cultured meat are mentioned in the last chapter of this book. However, from a cultural perspective, the new technologies are re-discussing the problem of meat, as it is the meaning of meat in itself that is changing. Burke (1998) asks whether Muslims and Jews should eat sheep meat only containing one pork gene; or whether vegetarians should eat vegetables containing animal genes. Finally, the ultimate question regards animals containing human genes, and the possibility that eating them may be referred to as cannibalism.

### 2.3.4 *Meat and Psychology*

Eating meat has also been studied as a matter of psychology. The idea of eating an animal and its links to blood, death, power and so on provoke reactions that are deeper than those originating from eating other kinds of food. I have already reported Fiddes's (1991) idea that giving meat a different name from the animal is a way of hiding the origins of what we are eating. Simoons (1994) further tries to explain why many people around the world abstain from meat and the roots of this decision.

Masson (2009), meaningfully a food researcher but also a psychoanalyst, develops this sort of detachment and lists all the techniques that our minds use to separate the image of the animal and that of meat. There are diverse strategies: denial, ignoring, minimizing, and 'not in my backyard' are the most practiced ones. Also 'splitting' is really comfortable, as it consists of dividing the meat coming from good farms from that originating in bad businesses. Reversal is, alternatively, the strategy of persuading ourselves that actually we suffer more than the animals, as we have to work hard to maintain animals providing meat clean, safe and well

fed. In the end, all of these techniques are defensive strategies, and for Masson (2009) this means that a problem linked to the idea of eating an animal does exist.

The novelist Foer (2009) has defended Masson's (2009) category of splitting. In fact, he argues that it is ethical to eat meat obtained from animals that did not suffer before dying and that have been killed 'well'. Also thanks to Foer's popularity, this theory has become really widespread in the last ten years. On the one hand, it has undoubtedly made popular the debate on meat eating, and has taken the issue to people that, otherwise, would have never wondered whether eating an animal poses ethical problems. On the other hand, it has paved the way to comprehensible critiques concerning the idea of being killed well. Does a good way of killing exist?

Rozin (2007) argues that the psychological relevance of meat is due to its ambivalence. Meat is in fact both the most prohibited and the most suggested food of all; the most nutritious and the most dangerous for our health; it requires exceptional skills (hunting, carving, etc.) but also poses the most important of the moral questions (is it right to kill?). For him, all of this depends on the fact that meat is the food that is made of the same substance as our body, and thus it is the food that more than the others provokes disgust.

Marvin and Ingle (1999) relate meat to the role of the soldier and to "touching death", and this confers masculinity onto meat and to those who prepare and eat it. Finally, Watts (2006) argues that the meat-eater has always been considered as superior to the others, and that s/he may be referred to as the noble carnivore. This point is certainly challenged in the many studies concerning vegetarianism and veganism, which are the focus of the following subsection.

### ***2.3.5 Vegetarianism and Veganism***

Even though studies on vegetarianism and veganism have existed over the entire period analyzed in this book, in the last twenty years they have multiplied to the point that today they constitute an entire category of food studies. Vegetarianism and veganism have always had deep philosophical roots. Singer (1980) explained his vegetarianism with his belonging to the philosophical school of utilitarianism. As utilitarianism aims to minimize pain and maximize pleasure, the way animals are raised and killed is in clear contradiction with this theory. Thus, for Singer (1980), being utilitarian also means being vegetarian. In another study, Singer (1975) explains and condemns the concept of speciesism, that is, the idea that one species (the human one) is better than the others. For Singer it descends from pre-Darwinian theories such as Judeo-Christian teaching and the Aristotelian view of Nature explained above in this chapter. These points of view aim to split humans from animals and not to consider the commonalities between them.

Singer's theories have become a sort of classic of global vegetarianism and veganism, and have accompanied the flourishing of these eating practices. More critically, Ashley et al. (2004) argue instead that vegetarianism is a social

construction and a confused category, In fact, many people who consider themselves vegetarians eat fish and sometimes chicken.

Interesting quantitative studies have analyzed the spread of vegetarianism in many countries. Beardsworth and Keil (1997) report that in Britain from 1984 and 1990 the number of vegetarians and of people only avoiding red meat almost doubled. On eating out, Warde and Martens (1998) find that the practice of eating at a restaurant has increased between the 1980s and the 1990s, and that at the restaurant men prefer red meat, while women more often eat fish and chicken.

Vegetarianism has often been associated with feminism, and meat has been seen as a source of socially constructed gender divide. I have already explained Adams's (2010) theories, however many other studies focus on this perspective. Sociologist Twigg (1979) argues that in the current society meat plays a dominant role comparable to that played by men, and that meat eaters are more associated with power and masculinity than vegetable or cereal eaters. In this light, vegetarianism is seen as a feminist weapon. Allen et al. (2000), alternatively, find that meat-eaters rely on rationality, authoritarianism and hierarchy, while vegetarians and vegans on emotions, social justice and peace. Joy's (2010) carnism is a theory centering on the split between various animals and on the ways we construct cats and dogs as friends and cows and pigs as foods. Carnism is for Joy a dominant ideology to fight, in order to achieve a more balanced and less violent way of life.

## 2.4 The Point of This Book: Meat as Energy

All the theories mentioned so far have contributed to increasing my interest in meat and to develop my personal perspective on this item of food. I have considered all these studies as containing parts of a bigger truth. Even though each academic discipline often states that they have the exclusivity of being right and that the others are wrong, I do not find contradiction in saying that meat testifies to the human development, structures society and is represented as masculine because of its links to war, blood and death. Once I have had a clearer image of what meat means to humans, I started to develop the idea that meat has often been seen as a form of energy, and that the period 1900–the present has been crossed by so many technological, social, cultural and political changes that it is the best lens to tell this story. However, to better explain the point of this book, it is necessary to frame meat between the two concepts of Nature and Culture.

### 2.4.1 *Meat Between Nature and Culture*

Philosophically, meat is a transactional element between life and death and between Nature and Culture. As an ex-animal, it was alive, but as an item of food it is dead.

Similarly, as an animal it is a natural element, while as an item of food that is slaughtered, processed and prepared, it is a cultural product modified by humans.

Biosemiotics is the part of semiotics founded by Sebeok (1977, 2001) analyzing natural systems of signs, such as bodies and vegetal organisms. In doing so, it has often analyzed the relationships between human beings and the natural setting, and thus the relationships between Nature (the environment where we live) and Culture (the human intervention on Nature). This is why biosemiotics is really precious in analyzing an element, meat, which is positioned between Nature and Culture.

The Aristotelian paradigm saw Nature and Culture as separate and in contrast. As in the case of the pre-Darwinian theories cited above, in the past humans were considered as a sort of different guests of the world, superior to the others. Darwinism and the various discoveries on human evolution have challenged but never defeated this perspective, which has long remained dominant.

Conversely, Sebeok (1977, 2001) and later other biosemioticians, such as Martinelli (2010) and Favareau (2010), have put forward a more holistic paradigm in which the two concepts are neither separate nor in contrast. Simply, humans with their intervention, that is, Culture, are seen as only a part of Nature. Human beings are in fact a part of Nature as any animal, but their cultural abilities allow them to play a different role. Finally, biosemiotics has also challenged the view according to which animals are passive in terms of communication, and have instead analyzed the many forms in which non-human animals communicate and build meaning. They do so in different ways from human animals, but these ways must however be considered as forms of communication.

Looking at meat through these lenses is really meaningful, as it is clear that, to those dividing Nature from Culture, eating meat means power over Nature and the prevalence of Culture. Instead, if we assume with Sebeok (1977, 2001) that Nature and Culture are not separated, but that Culture is only a part of Nature, the new paradigm asks us to rethink meat and its system.

#### ***2.4.2 Meat as a Semiotic Sign Meaning Energy***

In this book, I point out that to rethink meat and its system, and to understand what it represents to us, our mistakes made in the past, and the potential improvements that we can develop in the future, we must conceive of meat as a source of energy.

In the next chapters, I will analyze cultural, social and political representations of meat, and in many of them we may say that this item of food has often symbolized energy, a specific kind of energy destined to our bodies. Certainly, animals providing meat are different from what we usually consider as sources of energy, such as oil, gas, and so on. However, all the mechanisms, the living and the in-animated ones, require energy. Moreover, they have not to be conceived as so different: in fact, the living bodies belong to Nature and the machinery to Culture, but as seen above, these two categories are not separated or in contrast. Rather, by being part of Culture, machines are also parts of Nature, as they are the creations of Natural

elements like human beings. Meat has often been represented as the energy for the machinery inside us, that is, our living bodies. Conversely, machines that are external to us have been fueled with carbon, oil, etc. Today, industrial machines are gradually leaving aside fossil sources, preferring renewable sources such as wind, the sun, etc. And what about meat? Chapter 8 discusses forms of ‘renewable’ meat.

Thus, apart from analyzing these representations, I will connect meat to other sources of energy, in order to find out whether it is extracted with the same techniques, aim, and philosophy as oil, carbon and so on. To do so, semiotics is fundamental. Besides the frequently underlined semiotic ability to read and interpret signs and symbols, in fact, semiotics has the often underrated capability of analyzing interrelations; and what counts in this book are the many cultural interrelations that are changing our relationships to meat. In the end, how this book means cultural history is exactly the analysis of the interrelations among various cultural elements, and of how these interrelations have changed entire systems of things, in this case the system of meat.

## 2.5 Flash Fiction: From Eating Meat to Being Meat

Someone opened the entrance door by the entry phone and I got into the building. As I saw them, I perfectly remembered the stairs leading to the apartment on the first floor. Only, they were older and sadder. The first time I went up, they seemed to me a sort of bridge to a successful academic career and a joyful life. I was a student, and Professor Schumann had invited me to her home, to discuss some interviews I would do during the next days for my dissertation. “Call me Julia”, she told me, and I felt that really those stairs were a springboard for me. I visited Julia many times during my studies and my teaching at the university, but later our meetings became rarer. Marriage, kids and grief don’t help careers. The last time we met was about twenty years earlier... After it, only a couple of emails.

While going up again after all these years, the stairs seemed to me a springboard again, but leading to somewhere else. Julia was about to die, and had called me and other ex-students to say ‘farewell’.

A man opened the door. Strange to say, but I had never known anything about Julia’s intimate life. I didn’t have any idea of her marital status, whether she had anyone, a man or a woman. The man, silently, accompanied me to the threshold and went away. I opened the door and entered. Julia was there, on the bed, and like the stairs she resembled herself in the past, but was older and sadder. She was thinner than I had ever seen her or anyone else, and that was why her eyes were on the brink of going out of her face. A man and a woman were with her.

She smiled. “Come in, probably you know Vittorio and Jenny...” I knew them, and smiled too. They had continued what I had given up, and still worked at the university. Vittorio had replaced Julia when she had retired.

“Scrap that sad face, Maggie—she told me—this is only to say farewell to you three, or goodbye, or hello... it depends... Doctors say there is nothing to do. I’m

sorry for this, but I'm 84, so can't say anything... I've always studied life, and it's difficult for me to talk about death."

"You'll manage" Vittorio said, and I immediately understood that sometimes the wise person stays silent.

Julia went on: "I've studied living human beings and their sentiments for my entire life..." "And it was so fascinating to attend your lectures..." said Jenny taking advantage of Julia's interruption. I took the nerve to say something: "I loved it, when you talked about your social research on marriage, parenthood, political passion..."

"Life!", said Vittorio.

Julia spoke again after a sip of water: "I know, but now that I'm on the edge, I see that there is something else to study, if you want to understand this stuff we have around... But evidently, I have not time to do it..."

"What is it?" asked Jenny.

"Meat", said Julia.

Vittorio, Jenny and I looked at each other.

"Meetings?" Vittorio asked.

"Meat—Julia repeated—It's what I'm becoming."

She looked at me, but frankly I had nothing to say.

"We won't eat you, I promise..." I only managed to say while thinking that I wasn't a wise woman in that moment.

Julia laughed and the skin of her face seemed to rip off irremediably, but in a few seconds her face was again hers. "I'm becoming meat for the Earth—she said—In a couple of months the Earth will eat me... Don't get me wrong, I'm happy for this! I'll feed animals, plants... and even people through them. I'm taking this as a kind of restitution after the kilos of meat I have eaten during my life... even though there is a big difference. The Earth will eat me when I die naturally, while I ate animals that were killed by us to become meat..."

I was curious by all of that. "Why study meat, then?", I asked.

I didn't know whether Julia had listened to me or if she continued her conversation as if anyone else had spoken. "The Earth will eat me and my ideas, dreams, passions, laughs... and even my lectures! ... everything is inside me will disappear...—she said—I am really sorry that when I ate meat, I never thought that I was eating not only the animal, but also its ideas, dreams, passions, laughs and many other things... We have killed all of them, and studying meat will make us aware of it... It will be a kind of restitution, as for me. In studying dead flesh, you'll study the lives of those unlucky animals."

She stopped and we all were wise enough to stay silent. Julia then changed her face and asked us about people we had known together in the past. We talked about other things, and Vittorio, Jenny, and I reminded Julia of old discussions, projects, and people that had animated our lives in those years. In the end, we said "Farewell, goodbye, or hello" to Julia, and laughed all together, like crazy people not understanding what is around the corner. Once on the street, I hugged Vittorio and Jenny. We promised to see each other soon and each of us was on their way in a couple of minutes.



I felt liberated. Marriage was over, kids were almost adults, grief was behind me, and that bookshop at the corner probably had some good books on meat for a new start.

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