



Eating E.T.: Carnism and Speciesism

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Abstract

This article takes as its motivation an event in which a plant-based version of the space alien, the Extra-Terrestrial ('E.T. '), from the science fiction film bearing its name, was barbecued and served as a meal to participants at a conference. The soy dish produced different reactions: some laughed, while others seemed appalled. These different sentiments provide the basis for a broad green cultural criminology analysis of the traditions of meat-eating, tracing its role in human history and in the barbecue. The purpose of this is to explore why humans treat different categories of animals so differently. To understand the reactions the meal produced, the article addresses two contrasting aspects of the human–non-human animal relationship—'carnism' and 'pet-keeping'—and contemplates these in relation to the reactions to eating E.T. The goal is to expand on the study of the human–animal relationship, particularly speciesism—understood as ideology and practice that legitimise and produce animal abuse through the analytical concept *categorical discriminatory speciesism*.

Keywords: Carnism; speciesism; cannibalism; veganism, food culture.

Introduction¹

Many years ago, I attended an animal abuse symposium in Lund, Sweden. The seminar was cross-disciplinary, and presentations included studies of animal abuse from historical, humanitarian, legal and sociological perspectives (Andersson et al. 2014). The menu was vegan. On the last day, we celebrated the conclusion of the conference with a barbecue. As I entered the garden where the barbecue was held, to my great astonishment, I saw a big animal being roasted. As I came closer, I realised that it was a plant-based version of the space alien, E.T., the Extra-Terrestrial from the 1982 science fiction film bearing the same name (produced and directed by Steven Spielberg). The soy dish, which had been cooked and sliced to become our meal that evening, produced different sentiments among the guests. Many displayed obvious discomfort; they found something thoroughly unpleasant about eating E.T. Others laughed. This paper draws on this experience, which I use as an opportunity to explore and discuss the reasons for these different reactions to a plant-based dish, and how they compare to the traditions and general cultural acceptance of carnism and meatism (e.g., Gålmark 2008; Joy 2020). The question I ask is whether categorical discriminatory speciesism, through which non-human animals are cast in different roles that determine their level of protection, also explains the different reactions to eating the soy E.T. at the barbecue, and whether this may also shed light on the paradoxical human–animal relationship. How can a fictional character like E.T. come to take the role of someone worthy of protecting, perhaps even more than the live, sentient animals who are tormented in the food industry every second?

The categorical divisions humans make of non-human animals largely determine how we treat them—for example, 'production animals' are eaten, 'fur animals' are killed and skinned, 'racehorses' and 'racedogs' are forced to compete, and 'animal research models' are used in experiments. The different categories also offer moral guidance regarding the legitimacy of the treatment to which humans subject them (Sollund, 2021). Our 'pets' have a special position; they are our companions, our 'children'. Many 'pet' keepers will refer to themselves as mum or dad when speaking to their pets, and parrots, for example, are referred



to as ‘fids’ (feathered kids) (Anderson 2003). E.T. is also a friend, a companion—a ‘pet’, perhaps even a hero—but also an alien. In the film, E.T. wins our hearts, which may have been the reason why many exhibited such negative reactions to eating him—much the way that most Westerners react with disdain to the idea of eating dogs and cats.

For some of the participants at the barbecue, the E.T. that was roasted was not an ‘individual’ but merely soy mass and a good way to make a statement concerning all those millions of animals who are similarly roasted on a daily basis. In contrast, E.T. was not a person (Francione 2008) or a non-human animal (henceforth ‘animal’²) but merely a vegan food source. Essentially, for some, this E.T. was nothing more than a block of soy in the shape of a recognisable creature. For others—those who reacted negatively—the E.T. that was roasted had too close a resemblance to *someone*—a ‘person’ whom they had seen on the screen and who left an imprint on them—one who gained worldwide recognition and love, even though he was ‘just’ an artificial character in a sentimental children’s movie. For others, because of its resemblance to the millions of animals who suffer in the meat industry, the E.T. at the barbecue was deeply troubling. Just as pieces were sliced off E.T. as he turned on the spit, so, too, are pieces sliced off animals who have been killed for their flesh everywhere in the world.

This article is situated within the theoretical framework of green cultural criminology (see, for example, Brisman and South 2013, 2014)—a direction within criminology ‘that seeks to incorporate a concern with the cultural significance of the environment, environmental crime, and environmental harm into the green criminological enterprise’ (Brisman and South 2013: 115). Green criminology has for decades included animal abuse as a legitimate field of study (see, for example, Beirne 1999, 2014; Maher et al. 2017; Nurse 2016; Sollund 2008, 2012; White 2013); thus, for many, green criminology is also a non-speciesist criminology, focusing on species justice and animal rights (see, for example, Beirne 1999, 2014; White 2013). These perspectives imply that animals should be allowed to live their lives without being victims of human-inflicted harm and premature death. Given the colossal numbers of animals who die in the food industry as well as carnism’s role in deforestation and global warming, it is urgent that we discuss the ways in which consumerism connected to cultural traditions impact both individual animal abuse and the environmental destruction caused by meat production (Brisman and South 2014; Wyatt 2014). Among cultural representations, I include films and advertisements that portray the eating of animal flesh as a harmless activity that also produces well-being and social relations. In contrast to the invisible, anonymous animals who are eaten stand the animals who are or become *someone*, whether as genuine ‘pets’ or as fiction figures like E.T., whom I, for the purpose of this article, include in the animal kingdom.

While cultural criminology uses media representations to analyse criminological matters (Brisman and South 2013, 2014), in this article, I take a character from a science fiction film as a point of departure to discuss the cultural traditions and roots of carnism. Both green criminology and cultural criminology ‘push against the conventional borders of criminology ... and are open to explore a range of social harms and social consequences’ (Ferrell 2020: 638), and, as a contribution that leans on both cultural and green criminology, this is not a conventional criminology paper. Rather, it seeks to expand our understanding of our daily consumption choices and how they are rooted in and can mirror the ways in which we experience fiction and vice versa (see, for example, Mazurek 2017). In other words, media representations and consumption choices are intertwined. For example, it is not by accident that food culture spreads as many dishes travel around the globe when they are being portrayed in advertisements and films as the ‘in-food’, the food that is the choice of the ‘elite’, whether sushi or increasingly vegan choices like soy ‘meat’ balls. Films often include social gatherings where the dinners include meat, such as those showing a roasted turkey consumed in Thanksgiving dinners in the United States (US), which is a frequent scene in ‘feel-good films’. Such movies seem to make a causal connection between carnism and the emotional fulfilment of the consumers and participants of the meal, points to which I will return.

I now proceed to trace the roots of the barbecue and consider the historical and contemporary, social meaning of sharing a meal. From here, I consider who E.T. was to explore the reasons why people reacted differently to eating him. For example, why is it that E.T., in all his alienness, also has a familiarity to him that makes not only the boy in the film but also the public love him? Thereafter, I turn to humans’ domestication of animals, since this is central to understanding how animals changed from being part of our spiritual world—which was and continues to be the case for Indigenous peoples around the globe—to becoming only a piece of meat on a dish. This leads to a discussion of speciesism, followed by a concluding consideration of the issue of ethical veganism and vegetarianism.

The Historic and Current Barbecue

The barbecue can have a communal component to it—the preparation of a meal shared by a group of family and/or friends. It has traditions rooted back to prehistoric times when humans (of whichever subspecies) learned how to create and preserve fire. Berna and colleagues (2012) have unearthed what appears to be traces of campfires dating back millions of years. The remains of charred, non-human animal bones and plant remains were discovered in the Wonderwerk Cave in South Africa, a site of human and early hominin habitation for two million years. The researchers found the remains in a layer of rock that contained hand axes, stone flakes and other tools that have been attributed to a particular human ancestor in other excavations: Homo

erectus. This human species, characterised by an upright and robust build, lived from 1.8 million to 2 million years ago. The archaeologists found that these early hominins were cooking meat inside the cave and that cooked meat was part of their diet (Berna et al. 2012: E1219). According to Pobiner (2016: 110), ‘a tidy package of archaeological evidence of the earliest butchery and stone tools—in other words, carnivory—seems to have emerged by at least 2.5 million years ago with the origins of our genus’.

The use of fire to cook meat continued. Evidence of humans’ control of fire is also dated back 300,000–400,000 years and was located in the Qesem Cave in Israel, connecting the control of fire with *Homo sapiens* and Neanderthals. Animals consumed in the Qesem Cave include fallow deer, red deer, horses, aurochs, wild pigs, and wild ass (Barkai et al. 2017). Barkai and colleagues (2017) underline the cultural importance of using fire to cook meat. While hunting has millennia-long traditions, the earliest humanoids were scavengers. Clear evidence of hunting has been dated to only 400,000–500,000 years ago (Cartmill 1993; Kalof 2007, both cited in Chiles and Fitzgerald 2018).

The humanoid species that cooked the first meat meal were different from our own, as were the species that followed (e.g., the Neanderthals). However, as scientific analysis has determined, modern humans still share DNA with these prehistoric humanoids: approximately 1%–3% of the genomes of all people outside sub-Saharan Africa show Neanderthal ancestry, while up to 5% of the genomes of people in Oceania were contributed by another group, the Denisovans, who have been identified based on a genome sequence from a bone found in southern Siberia (Pääbo 2015). They were distant relatives of the Neanderthals.

The abundance of food that the early hunter-gatherers would obtain from killing megafauna may have been the origin of the contemporary communal barbecues and an example of exchanges of gifts, which are intrinsic to all cultures (Mauss 2002). To invite friends to dinner still requires an invitation, and then a subsequent invitation again; in this way, the cycle continues and strengthens social bonds. There is no reason why the food people share today should come from an animal’s corpse, but, in general, meat is held in higher regard than vegetarian or vegan food sources due to the power of advertising by meat industries (Joy 2020; Sollund 2021), which is part of destructive consumerism more generally (Brisman and South 2014). The consumption of meat, particularly meat from wild animals—the more exotic the species, the better—is still a way to exhibit and achieve social status. For example, hunters strategically transfer meat to each other to recruit and maintain coalitional support in Ecuador (Patton 2005), and Norwegian hunters invite friends to share a meal cooked from an animal the host has shot because meat from wild animals is viewed more favourably than that from animals slaughtered in industrial slaughter complexes (Linna 2015).

With these long timelines for humans’ use of fire and meat-eating in mind, one is led to wonder how deeply engrained it is in us—this practice of cooking an animal and its parts over an open fire. It has been established that the discovery of how to control fire and cook meat has affected the human brain and our development. For example, Aiello and Wheeler (1995) have reasoned that the nutritionally dense muscle mass of other animals was the key food that contributed to the evolution of our large brains. Aiello and Wheeler (1995) maintain that without the abundance of calories afforded by meat-eating, the human brain simply could not have evolved to its current form (see also Pobiner 2016). However, that meat was crucial for the development of the human brain has been refuted (Chiles and Fitzgerald 2018). While ‘carnism’ (Joy 2020) or ‘meatism’ (Gålmark 2008) may have been important for the physical development of the humans we are today, as mentioned, meat-eating also has deep *cultural* roots. These may have positively (or negatively) influenced the perception of the modern barbecue and the animals we roast over the fire who are reduced to ‘meat’ (Chiles and Fitzgerald 2018; Sollund 2021).

Case studies from the US and Israel note how the barbecue is a ritual that takes place on national holidays, such as the aforementioned Thanksgiving turkey dinner gatherings, thus forming part of national identity and functioning as a type of cultural expression (Shoham 2021). Roof (2010) emphasised the importance of the barbecue for the cultural identity of people in the southern US, describing it as almost a sacred ritual. Similarly, Veteto and Maclin (2012) state that in the southern US, there are three things that should be defended to the death—religion, politics and barbecue. Similarly, the cultural pride and identity connected to the *asado* in Argentina are so pronounced that it must be one of the hardest places in the world to be a vegetarian (DeLessio-Parson 2013), apart from Greenland and parts of Alaska, where people genuinely depend on a carnivore diet. Meat-eating and the barbecue also have gendered dimensions (see, for example, Adams 2018; Kildal and Syse 2017; Schösler et al. 2015). In different parts of the world, men will protest plant-based diets, perceiving meat-eating as a way of expressing their masculinity—something that goes beyond preferring meat simply because they believe that it may offer more protein than most plants (Adams 2018; Rothgerber 2013).³

Several aspects of the barbecue are, therefore, important. This is why, for the purpose of this article, I want to focus on what provoked the different reactions to eating E.T. (such as the cultural dimensions and implications of the traditions of the barbecue and meat-eating), before discussing what appears to be an increasing turn towards ethical and moral vegetarianism and veganism.

When the ‘Animal’ Becomes ‘Meat’

The animals most often roasted on a barbecue are pigs, chickens, lambs and calves—animals who are not allowed to live until they grow up and who usually live miserably during the short life span they are allowed in industrial farming complexes. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2023), 80 billion land animals are slaughtered per year, an increase from less than 10 billion in 1961. In addition to these terrestrial animals, aquatic animals, such as fish, including those farmed in the aquacultural industry, are consumed in such high numbers that their amounts are most often referred to in tons. More than 40 million tons of fish are caught in just East Asia and the Pacific.⁴ More than 80 million tons of aquatic animals are killed in the aquafarming industry in the same region. Norway is responsible for about half of the world’s environmentally damaging production of Atlantic salmon, with 1.28 million tons in 2018 (Steinset 2020). While salmon and trout are pushed by the aquafarming industry as particularly fit to put on the grill during the summer months in Norway, it is still chicken, pigs, and calves or cows who most often end up on the plates around the world. All these animals use a lot of space. According to an article in *The New Republic*, (Atkin, 2019) to accommodate the 70 billion land animals raised annually for human consumption, a third of the planet’s ice-free land surface is used, as well as nearly 16 per cent of global freshwater. About three-quarters of the Brazilian Amazon’s deforestation has occurred to clear space for animal agriculture.

To become ‘meat’, one must first be killed, but the spectacle of killing is something most people want to avoid, which was why the brutality of industrialised killing in the abattoirs was hidden from people by locating them far away from villages in the early 1800s (Vialles 1994). In preindustrial times, the slaughter of animals was something quotidian: most people were aware of it, and slaughter took place in streets and markets, for example, in the Shambles in York in the United Kingdom, which today is an idyllic street attractive to tourists that reveal nothing about previous horror scenes. The same can be said about Smithfield Market in London—today, a nice place to visit, but when these places were the scenes for slaughter, they were, from the perspectives of the animals, the courtyards of hell. As meat consumption increased, so did the stench and the waste, which also contributed to the establishment of the abattoirs. The killing was removed from plain sight, at pace with an increased humanitarian spirit and sensitivity to violence.⁵ This was about the same time public executions ended, something that links to the same change in sentiment towards violence and the development of punishment moving from the body to the soul (Foucault 2012). The development of increased sensitivity to slaughter today stands in sharp contrast to the horrors in the industrialised slaughterhouses (Fitzgerald 2010).

In the US, the first slaughterhouse for pigs was established in 1662 in Springfield, Massachusetts. Chicago, Illinois, developed quickly into the industrial capital of slaughterhouses, where the infamous Union Stock Yard opened in 1865. This was an enormous industrial complex where many of the workers lived in slum housing attached to the slaughterhouses. Slum housing was characterised by poverty, population density, crime and pollution, and it housed more immigrants than natives (Fitzgerald 2010). As a response to an increased taste for meat, the industrialisation of the killing process increased. By the 1880s, it had developed into an assembly line mass production industry, which became the model for Henry Ford’s car production (Fitzgerald 2010). The assembly line has continued to increase its speed. In the 1880s, 179 cattle were killed per hour in the US; in 2010, 4400 were killed in an hour. By comparison, in Europe, generally 69 cattle are killed in an hour (Fitzgerald 2010). The slaughterhouses have increased in size, with more animals killed and fewer people handling them, which entails an increased alienation between humans and animals (Sollund 2008). In a slaughterhouse assembly line, for example, chickens are grabbed by a leg and connected to a device that moves in a circle towards a knife that slices the chicken’s throat and kills her, if things go as planned. Male chicks are ground alive because they cannot lay eggs and are deemed ‘useless’ (Sollund 2021). Pigs are killed by the use of carbon dioxide, which may cause painful and distressing asphyxiation even when the process goes as planned (Conlee et al. 2005), which often it does not, leaving the pigs to be dumped and skinned alive in boiling water (Sollund 2021).

More recently, the slaughterhouses in the US have been moved closer to urban areas and closer to the industrialised breeding of animals for meat, which reduces transportation costs. The sizes of such factory farms increase at the cost of animal welfare. Often the slaughterhouse is the core business in a town, and again it attracts migrants who work under harsh conditions (Fitzgerald 2010).

Pigs are placed in pens where they cannot move, such as in Denmark, with no regard to their mental and physical needs and abilities. Much more could be said about animal abuse in meat production; suffice it to say, the factory farming and industrialised abattoirs of today undoubtedly involve massive suffering and death. This production contrasts with animal husbandry with longer traditions and whose images are still used to entice people to eat meat (Hallsworth 2008). The ‘happy’ cows and pigs in the pictures are perhaps never allowed to feel the sun on their skin, breathe fresh air, or nuzzle their snouts in the earth and eat the grass. However, the way the meat industry portrays them idolises meat production, presenting the keeping of animals for meat as doing them a favour since they were brought to this wonderful life for that purpose. Consequently, eating them becomes unproblematic and perhaps even something one should endeavour for the common good.

Animal Domestication

Today's industrial meat production has roots back to when humans first domesticated land animals, such as cows, pigs and sheep. Animal domestication is 'an axiomatic coevolutionary process in which a population responds to selective pressure while adapting to a novel niche that includes another species with evolving behaviours' (Larson and Fuller 2014: 117). The first domesticated animals were those we today refer to as 'pets', who were brought home from their habitats, whether primates, parrots, wolves or sloths. Dogs, cats and humans share 10,000–12,000 years of co-evolution (Driscoll et al. 2009). However, the early domestication processes differ in an important sense. While the 'pets' were meant to provide companionship or to offer their services, whether as rat-catchers, guards or hunting companions, the cows, pig, goats and sheep were domesticated and made parts of households because they had something that could be taken from their bodies, such as wool, skin, milk, eggs or meat. The domestication of plants and animals over the past 10,000–12,000 years has significantly transformed Earth's biosphere, affecting human population size and altering human evolution (Larson and Fuller 2014), but it has also and most decisively altered the lives of animals. While the wolf was the first animal to be made part of humans' close relations to animals other than other humans, and which developed into the dog, humans changed their practices from hunting herbivores to breeding them (Larson and Fuller 2014). Although the total number of domesticated animals doubled in the middle Holocene (4,000–8,000 years ago)—several thousand years after the first domestication episodes—most domestic animals on Earth have been domesticated in the past few centuries (Larson and Fuller 2014: 127).

The early herding of cattle was not only the roots of modern, industrialised factory farming, but also of capitalism. The word 'capital' can be traced to the word 'cattle' (Børresen 1996; Nibert 2013), emphasising the instrumental use of animals. Indeed, according to Nibert, global injustice and inequality stem from this history of 'domesecration'.⁶ Nibert points out that the way in which humans use domesticated animals is a hegemonic institution, like capitalism. The use of non-human animals is so profoundly ingrained in human societies that the violence it implicates is largely unchallenged, with contagious effects. In other words, human and animal oppression are intertwined. Human slavery and the colonisation of the Americas developed alongside the domestication of other species because those in power required human labour to maintain the subjugation of other animals in farming (Nibert 2013). Therefore, while the colonisers brought their cattle to Argentina, these animals did not come without baggage; they were accompanied by exploitative, subjugating practices that led not only to the cultural tradition of the *asado* but also the persecution and exploitation of Indigenous peoples.

Carnism is deeply culturally ingrained in human lifestyles and has changed landscapes and our relationships with other species. However, meat-eating has not been as 'naturalised' as many will argue when they defend the practice, which has far more severe moral implications today than when early humanoids scavenged their first animal flesh or the Denisovans and the Neanderthals made their first barbecue. According to a historical cultural analysis of humans' meat-eating, meat-eating has not always been so prevalent. Chiles and Fitzgerald (2018: 20) find that 'rather, meat consumption has been leveraged for notable social purposes, such as to demonstrate cultural status and superiority'. While speciesism (Nibert 2003; Ryder 2010) may have roots among the early humanoids' scavenging and hunting, the domestication and colonisation of land and animal bodies certainly made speciesism even more profoundly ingrained in society.

When the 'Pet' or 'Companion' Becomes Meat

However, the species hierarchy does vary between cultures. In some countries, like China, Vietnam, South Korea, Nigeria, the Philippines and Switzerland, dogs and cats are not always elevated to the status of human companionship; they are regarded as meat and bred and consumed as such. The 10-day-long Dog Meat Festival in China, during which thousands of dogs and cats are slaughtered and eaten, including abducted 'pets', is perhaps the most infamous and critiqued. While eating dogs and cats may have long traditions, the fact that this festival started only in 2009 testifies to the fact that such traditions are neither carved in stone nor ancient. According to a 2020 report by the organisation FOUR PAWS, over 30 million dogs and cats are captured, tortured and killed for the dog and cat meat trade in Asia every year. In the Southeast Asian countries of Cambodia, Vietnam and Indonesia alone, an estimated total of more than nine million dogs and more than one million cats are killed each year for the trade (FOUR PAWS 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of dog meat increased because it was perceived as holding specific medicinal value (FOUR PAWS 2020).

While dogs and cats are on the plates in numerous countries, another animal that is often kept as a 'pet' is the guinea pig. It is also kept for its meat in Peru and can be purchased in little restaurants in the Andes. Eating these may, for anybody with a 'pet' guinea pig, seem just as repulsive as eating dogs to a dog owner—something I experienced when I travelled in the Andes in the 1980s.

Arguably, the high number of dogs and cats who are abducted or bred and slaughtered for meat includes a lot of suffering, but why is it that people in other parts of the world find this type of meat-eating so appalling but gladly will eat meat from a pig or a chicken? When an animal enters our social sphere, like dogs and cats usually do, they are included in our moral circle, which

means that they are accepted as family. To eat family would, of course, be taboo for most people. This is, for example, reflected in how people living on farms before the industrialisation of husbandry would not kill their animals themselves because they were socially connected to them; consequently, this task was left to a travelling butcher. Farmers would also exchange meat at Christmas to avoid eating their own animals (Børresen 1996).

Perhaps people feel appalled by the idea of eating dogs, cats and guinea pigs, as well as horses, because of the social bonds most people have to these species, either from personal experience or because they are aware of the categories into which these species are defined. Animals of these species are often considered family members (see, for example, Cain 1985; Cohen 2002), and one does not eat family. When people adopt non-human animals as family members, their relationship is mutual (at best) rather than exploitative; this generates well-being and equality (Cain 1985), and, as mentioned, many pet owners regard their pets as their children. To eat animals of these species can seem taboo—cannibalism (Eley 2018)—and may be why participants in the barbecue in Lund reacted negatively to eating E.T. Eating a dog or a cat can also be perceived as a betrayal to the mutual bond and social contract that has developed between humans and these species through the millennia of co-adaptation. While pigs also have been adapted to our needs for millennia, this is an exploitative adaptation, for example, breeding them to become enormous and produce more meat for us. Consequently, we are not bound by the social contract we have with our traditional ‘pets’.

Another element to this is that a dismembered family animal resting on a plate does not belong there. Douglas examines the religious dietary rules set out in Book of Leviticus, and cites that among the animals we may eat are ‘the ox, the sheep, the goat, the hart, the gazelle, the roe-buck, the wild goat, the ibex, the antelope and the mountain-sheep’ (Leviticus Deuteronomy xiv, in Douglas 2003: 52). The list goes on for which species may be eaten or not eaten, whether with cloven hoof or not. However, the dogs, cats and guinea pigs are not mentioned in the abominations of Leviticus, so the general aversion to eating them may, as shown, have other roots.

Although dogs, cats and guinea pigs may be prepared as food, the food is still made from the dead corpses of animals who should not have been treated that way, and the transformation of them from companion to corpse to ‘food’ and ‘meat’ position them as out of place, just like a shoe on a table is out of place (Douglas 1996). Eating these animals challenges the cultural values of most Westerners through which our ‘pets’ are (or should be) recipients of care; they are not food. Some species are banned from the table because of religious rules while others not, seemingly following no easily comprehensible logic. In Douglas’s words, ‘all the interpretations given so far fall into one of two groups: either the rules are meaningless, arbitrary because their intent is disciplinary and not doctrinal, or they are allegories of virtues and vices’. Such arbitrary rules have still affected peoples’ menus throughout the centuries, whether in Judaism, Islam or other religions (Chiles and Fitzgerald 2018; Douglas 2003: 54).

A comment concerning octopuses from a colleague during a conference dinner invited another explanation for why eating some animals can be experienced as cannibalism while others are not. A documentary film he had seen proved the intelligence of octopuses (see Godfrey-Smith 2016), leading him to state: ‘I can never eat octopus again; they are so intelligent’. In his view, intelligence was a criterion that meant this species could no longer be on his plate; an octopus was not an ‘edible’ anymore. Yet, the incredible intelligence of octopuses does not protect them from being farmed and eaten, and octopus farming is increasing (Lara 2021).

If intelligence is a valid criterion, how can he (and I presume he will, but it is definitely the case for billions of other people) eat pigs? Pigs are intelligent; the complexity of pig behaviour is documented and indicates sophisticated associative learning abilities (Mendl et al. 2010). They also resemble us far more than an octopus. Yet the Chinese recently opened an enormous ‘pig factory’. According to *The Guardian* on the southern outskirts of Ezhou, a city in central China’s Hubei province, a 26-storey building with a capacity to slaughter 1.2 million pigs a year is by far the biggest single-building pig farm in the world with the capacity to ‘house’ 650,000 animals.

To comprehend this, we need to look at what happens in the process of filling this building with animals born and raised for slaughter. They are a multitude, making it difficult to see each pig’s personality and cognitive abilities. Feeding is not done by humans but by automats, of course, which also makes this more difficult. They are already categorised as ‘food’. In addition, they are forced into submission, made powerless, and, as powerless, subdued individuals, they are disrespected. The pig became ‘domesticated’ and, therefore, is not treated with the same amount of respect as a ‘wild’ creature, such as a ‘wild boar’, which is a species many people fear and consequently respect because of their perceived aggression. One question in relation to the growing farming industry of octopuses is whether the respect and fascination many apparently have for octopuses will disappear as it has vanished for the pig.

While ‘slaughter animals’ are generally depreciated, devalued and disrespected, media stories about animals who escape slaughter are very popular, through which the animal in question receives status as a hero or heroine. Such stories include that

of Yvonne the cow, who ran away just as the farmer who owned her wanted to take her to slaughter. The people in the community highly protested against her being caught and killed, and she passed her last years in a sanctuary, where she died at the age of 14 (Pidd 2011). While these animals, who are often rewarded by being allowed to live out their lives in sanctuaries, are admired and their status elevated, the animals who do not manage to escape are left to perish in silence, out of the public eye. Why, then, do they become heroes? Is it because they challenge an oppressive, unjust regime that even meat-eaters recognise is precisely that?

Concluding Discussion

How we categorise animals determines how we treat, kill or 'sacrifice' them; hence, the respect people have for them is culturally dependent. Meat-eaters also argue for a carnivore diet based on various traditions. However, traditions are very malleable, and eating practices travel and spread with globalisation (Sollund 2021). As mentioned, sushi is eaten everywhere, not just in Japan, and the previously Mediterranean diet that includes the octopus has travelled to the US. Consequently, cultural culinary practices may be altered, adopted, adapted or abandoned. Therefore, tradition alone cannot justify expanded or continued practices that harm animals and the natural environment. Speciesism is nonetheless a characteristic of most societies. Carnism and the ancient practices of hunting and barbecuing non-human animals may, in itself, have contributed to, perhaps even been the foundation of, speciesism. While we continue to introduce more species into factory farming, speciesism may expand. When humans 'conquer' other animals and eat their flesh, humans are empowered directly and indirectly. While such conquering must have been very empowering in prehistoric times when killing megafauna implied a fight, which likely increased the respect for the victim, modern factory farming entails less respect, both for the person pulling the handle that kills the animal and for the animal victims themselves. While the early human hunters may have respected the animal who became their meat, this appears to be absent in the modern meat industry.

While there has been a tremendous increase in meat consumption over the past decades, not only in total but also for people individually (Joy 2021; Whitnall and Pits 2019), more people are also turning to a vegetarian or vegan diet. Vegans often use ethical arguments for choosing a vegan diet and reason this with their concern for the animals and the natural environment; they consider themselves more compassionate than carnivorous people (see, for example, Greenebaum 2012). Someone who is powerless, like a pig or chicken in the industrial complex, is seldom accorded respect but may be accorded care and empathy. Perhaps this is a reason for the increasing vegan movement?

Such empathy may have grown at a pace with the worsening of the conditions for the animals in the slaughter industry, and they have become unacceptable for many who care for animals. In this way, while industrialisation of the meat industry may increase in some parts of the world, as the example from China may imply. The situation may be gradually changing elsewhere, as in Europe and the US, where organic meat from 'happy animals' is more acceptable for some, while eating meat is totally rejected by others.

For example, the number of vegans and vegetarians and vegetarian and vegan restaurants has increased in Norway over time. A Norwegian study with 808 participants showed that 71% of people abandoned meat for the sake of the environment, while 67% were motivated by the bad treatment of animals, including fish (Bugge and Henjum 2021). This may indicate an increased sensitivity to animal abuse; perhaps this is also a sign of 'civilisation'. This is indicated by Mahatma Gandhi in his choice for a vegetarian diet, when he states: 'the greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated'. In his autobiography (Gandi 1983) elaborates on this and other insights that directed his choices, such as giving up milk because he regarded neither meat nor milk to be the diet of humans, thus, incorporating animal abuse as one of several important moral issues, including war.

While it must have been a huge leap forward for humanoids when they gained control over fire and could roast their meat, for the non-human species, this marked perhaps the most destructive turn of events in our shared past. When the human species had domesticated animals, they were objectified as meat, and this objectification and consequent alienation has since characterised the human–non-human animal relationship. A change in diet is urgent for the environment, but also for ethical and moral reasons that should be valued in modern society. Perhaps the need for such a transformation was also reflected in the reactions of the conference participants in the E.T. barbecue, for the reactions the sight of his corpse provoked.

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² ‘Animal’ is an anthropocentric word disguising that humans also are animals and creating an artificial divide between humans on one side, and all other ‘animals’, whether crabs, cod, elephants or dogs, on the other side. This becomes particularly clear when tracing human evolution. We ended up as the only humanoid, if one disregards our closest relatives among the primates as the orangutans and chimpanzees, and have egocentrically elevated ourselves to the status of ‘Homo sapiens’—the knowing species.

³ Many are unaware of the content of proteins (e.g., in beans and broccoli).

⁴ FAOSTAT. <https://www.fao.org/faostat/en/#data/QCL>

⁵ I owe this point to Avi Brisman.

⁶ The word ‘domeseccration’ is a combination of the word ‘domestication’ and ‘sacrilege’.

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