

MEAT



a natural symbol • Nick Fiddes

ROUTLEDGE



MEAT

A Natural Symbol

Nick Fiddes



London and New York

First published 1991
by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
a division of Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc.
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

© 1991 Nick Fiddes

Typeset in New Baskerville
by GilCoM Ltd, Mitcham, Surrey

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Biddles Ltd. Guildford and King's Lynn

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilized in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Fiddes, Nick, 1960–

Meat: a natural symbol

1. Food. Sociocultural aspects

I. Title

306

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Fiddes, Nick, 1960–

Meat, a natural symbol/Nick Fiddes.

p. cm

Includes bibliographical references.

1. Meat. 2. Food – Symbolic aspects. 3. Food habits.
4. Food preferences. 5. Carnivora. 6. Meat industry and trade.

I. Title. GT2868.5.F53 1991

394.1–dc20

90-23440

CIP

ISBN 0-415-04837-0

MEAT

PREFACE

As I recall, my interest in meat arose from a vague, but distinct, curiosity deriving from various episodes in my past. I have a vivid memory of a childhood holiday in France – I must have been about six at the time – when we children befriended a calf to which we gave the name Paddington, and my confusion on learning that we might well be eating Paddington before long, once he had grown up a little. I now know that the shock I felt is something that many children experience at some stage. I have been surprised at the numbers of parents encountered in the course of this study who related the story of their offspring's rebellion against meat, at whatever age. But, as with most children, I soon learned to accept the situation as normality.

I remember later conversations with my parents about why we call cows 'beef' and pigs 'pork' when they appear on the dinner plate – I must by now have been about 10 or 12. The precise explanation offered I do not now recall, except that it was somehow felt more polite to use these terms than their literal equivalents. This my youthful pride found difficult to accept: if we're going to eat cows and pigs, then why not be honest about it? Why try to dress it up as something else, as if we are afraid of facing the truth? I never did receive a satisfactory answer, and took a somewhat mischievous delight in occasionally referring to meat as 'dead animal' in situations where well-brought up children should not have done so.

As a teenager, the memory of a geography lesson comes to mind, when our teacher passed around a photocopied sheet about world food production, and the feeling of amazement that lingered for days on learning that there was no shortage of food in the world, but that the mass-starvation of which I had long

been aware was largely the result of unequal distribution. I remembered this some years later in a geography lecture at university on learning about the ecological inefficiency of a large population eating 'high on the food chain': that it makes about ten times more sense in efficiency terms to eat the grain itself than to feed it to cows and then eat them.

Years later still, while I was running a catering business with a partner, one contract we received was for an academic workshop at Edinburgh University (Centre for Human Ecology 1985) on the subject of meat. The food we prepared was to complement the discussions, with leaflets accompanying each meal describing the dishes provided, and we kept in touch with the proceedings. The most striking thing I learned in the process was how *little* was known about the social aspects of the phenomenon of meat eating. Arguments ranged around nutritional, historical, economic, political, and environmental influences, but it was clear that none of these could sufficiently explain the centrality of meat in the conventional diet – yet no one seemed able to offer more than anecdotal evidence about *why* meat was so important in the first place.

But, in the end, I think the most significant influence that stimulated me to consider this enquiry was an even more personal one. For many years I had been aware that many of my friends were vegetarian, and yet I was not. I had heard many convincing arguments against meat eating, and yet I had never felt willing or able to give it up. Sometimes I felt that I should, but could not, and so felt a sort of guilt at my lack of will and moral failure. At other times I reasoned that it was perfectly natural and not unhealthy in moderation, so why worry? The result was internal struggle, and general unease. I wanted to know why this issue had the power to confuse me so much.

The work has grown out a doctoral thesis conducted over three years in the department of Social Anthropology at Edinburgh University (Fiddes 1989). My approach was to assemble and interpret as multifarious a range of examples as possible of the part that meat plays in our lives. Information was thus culled from academic material, from the popular media, and from individual conversations and a series of about fifty tape-recorded interviews. Many of these interviews were with individuals who have a special interest in meat, either for or against, but the quotes in this text are offered mainly to illustrate ideas and the sorts of way in which they are represented in

PREFACE

everyday usage, and are not meant to represent particular people. Certainly I found no significant viewpoints peculiar to social groups, such as 'working-class' or young people. Rather, the ideas discussed are in general circulation, and are the stuff of constant interpretation, adaptation, and re-presentation throughout society.

What I have learned has forced me to reassess much about my entire life, not only in my attitude to meat but also in my approach to many other things: about the ways in which we behave towards each other and towards the habitat which sustains us. I feel that I have had to come face-to-face with an aspect of my identity of which I had previously been largely unaware, and that I might otherwise have continued to prefer not to recognise. Indeed, I now believe the very fact that we generally choose not to recognise certain important aspects of the meaning of our words and deeds to be significant in itself.

The analysis that follows uses a range of examples of the many ways in which we think about meat, talk about meat, and use meat – to look beyond the façade of the generally recognised, and to construct a coherent interpretation which accounts also for those ideas which are less often made explicit, but which may be effective nonetheless. It is not intended to imply that the symbolic notions associated with animal flesh provide a total explanation for the consumption patterns that exist. Clearly other factors such as nutrition are relevant. However, it is also clear that such influences, so often taken as objectively causal, are invariably subject to interpretation in contexts influenced by received ideas. This analysis is an attempt to redress the balance and, sometimes by deliberate overstatement, to demonstrate the importance of a social side of food habits which is all too often overlooked by a society convinced of its sophisticated rationality. This is an anthropological study of meat but it is also, from a particular angle, an ethnography of 'us': a society in the process of change.

My sincere thanks are due to everyone who has given me advice, assistance, motivation, and money. In particular I wish to thank Anna Ashmole for inspiring me to set out on this study, for her support and advice as it progressed, and for still being around to help so much at the end; Dr Alan Campbell and Dr Mary Noble of the department of Social Anthropology at Edinburgh University for being such excellent supervisors, and more; my

PREFACE

parents, Brian and Dorothy Fiddes for their unstinting love and support without which I could never have got so far, and especially my mother for proof-reading; Ulrich and Francesca Loening at the Edinburgh University Centre for Human Ecology for bringing the topic to my attention; Professor Sir Keith Thomas for his astute criticisms and kind compliments; Miranda France for her perceptive eleventh-hour commentary; Geoff Harrington of the Meat & Livestock Commission for his generous contributions and stimulating ideas; all my colleagues and friends for their invaluable comments, cuttings, and encouragement; and not least to the many people who gave so kindly of their time and patience in indulging me with my tape recorder. I am also eternally grateful for the support of the Carnegie Trust; Fitch Lovell plc; the Konrad Zweig Trust; Greg Sams; the University of Edinburgh Vans Dunlop scholarship committee; and the Vegetarian Society.

Nick Fiddes
1991

CONTENTS

<i>List of figures</i>	vi
<i>Preface</i>	vii
<i>Introduction</i>	1

Part I Background

1 FOOD = MEAT	11
2 A BRIEF HISTORY OF MEAT EATING	20
3 A MATTER OF TASTE	30
4 MORE THAN A MEAL	38

Part II Meat is Muscle

5 EVOLUTION AND ELEVATION	49
6 THE POWER OF MEAT	65
7 THE BARBARITY OF MEAT	94

Part III Mixed Meataphors

8 THE RELUCTANT CANNIBAL	121
9 PETS AND OTHER GREY ANIMALS	132
10 THE JOY OF SEX	144

Part IV Modern Meatologies

11 ECONOMICS	165
12 HEALTH	176
13 ETHICS	195
14 ECOLOGY	210
15 CONCLUSIONS	224

<i>Bibliography</i>	234
<i>Name index</i>	248
<i>Subject index</i>	254

FIGURES

1 Average consumption of meat per head per annum in UK, 1831–1984 (lbs)	25
2 Weekly consumption of meat by social class in 1937	26
3 Indices of meat consumption in the home, 1961–1988	27
4 Non-meat eaters. Make-up and change 1984–1990	29
5 A hierarchy of foods	112
6 Length of working time necessary to pay for 1lb of rump steak, 1971–1988	168

INTRODUCTION

This book is about meat. It is about what parts of which animals we habitually eat, when we eat meat, where we eat it, and with whom we eat it. Principally, it is about why we eat it, or why we do not. The central aims are to suggest, firstly, how meat has come to be the special food it is in Britain today – not why we eat meat at all, but why we eat so much, so often, and with such ceremony; and, secondly, to suggest why certain changes in our eating habits may be happening now.

The answers to these questions may seem so obvious as to be scarcely worth mentioning. It is easily taken for granted that meat is an important part of the diet because it is high in strength-giving protein, and simply because when cooked it tastes good and is satisfying. The fact of changes in eating habits are likewise routinely explained as fashion, or by reference to worries about high levels of saturated fats, or chemical residues, or perhaps about the cruelty involved in intensive husbandry . . . ‘Where is the problem?’, one might ask.

Such common-sense beliefs must be questioned, since what seems natural fact to us, in our particular society, at this particular time, is exposed as mere cultural orthodoxy when set against the range of beliefs and practices of other societies and in history. Many people live healthily with little or no meat in their diets. Others subsist almost exclusively upon it. And, as the meat industry is quick to point out, the health fears about eating meat seem, sometimes at least, to be out of proportion to the real physical threat involved.

Why are health concerns about the allegedly high fat content of meat being expressed now? In the Punjab ‘You look fat’ is said to be a compliment (Naipaul 1964: 80) and elsewhere meat

might be believed to make one thin. Even today many people still hold to the notion (wrongly, we are now told) that it is potatoes or rice that are most fattening. Why, whilst becoming less expensive as a proportion of average income, have purchases of the traditionally prestigious red meats been falling? And why have ethical concerns recently come to prominence, when for years most people have been happy to consume animal products without such worries? Our conventional explanations are not entirely adequate. Fuller answers must be sought by interpretation of what meat stands for in our culture.

The title of this work suggests that meat is a 'Natural Symbol'. This plays on Mary Douglas's work about bodily symbolism entitled *Natural Symbols* (1970), in which she showed how the human body is an immediately accessible and therefore natural metaphor for the expression of social experience. In similar vein, the global occurrence of certain ideas suggests that they may tend to arise by the very 'nature' of meat. This should not be surprising. We know that, biologically, food selection and consumption are highly significant – Young, for example, argues that 'food is about the most important influence in determining the organization of the brain and the behaviour that the brain dictates' (1968: 21). We know that societies use systems of classification to regulate their internal and external relations (e.g. Douglas 1973). This work suggests that our use of meat as a food reflects our categorisation of, and our relations towards, animal competitors, companions, and resources. Perhaps then it is only 'natural' that meat should be so widely selected for special social or ritual significance, even if only by its avoidance.

Calling meat a 'Natural Symbol' also, however, refers to the central organising idea of the work. The analysis is centred upon the argument that the most important feature of meat – which endows it with both its positive image as prestigious and vital nutrition, and simultaneously its contrary image as dangerously immoral and potentially unhealthy – is that it tangibly represents human control of the natural world. Consuming the muscle flesh of other highly evolved animals is a potent statement of our supreme power.

At this point it must be emphasised that this does not necessarily mean that we each consciously glory in the subjugation of animals whenever we bite into a piece of meat. The associations

INTRODUCTION

with environmental control which underpin meat's generally high status in our communal system of values do not have to be held consciously, individually, to be effective. It is rather that the principle of power over nature is an omnipresent thread running through the culture in which we are raised, and which forms the context of our thought and debate. It is not an invisible thread, but we usually do not see it, for reasons that will be explored. Through much of British history, and western history in general, human subjugation of the 'wild' natural world has been a central theme – at times an almost religious imperative – and I shall show that consumption of animal flesh has been an ideal exemplar of that control. Despite our rationalisations and refinements, modern scientific civilisation is no exception to this; meat still derives its peculiar significance from these basic ideas. In this sense too, meat is a Natural Symbol.

We define meat as the flesh of animals destined for our consumption. Until about the fourteenth century, 'meat' could mean any nourishment. Over time, usage of the term reduced in scope to mean animal food (much as 'drink' has begun particularly to denote alcohol); more recently its meaning has tended to exclude even poultry or fish. According to the the book of Genesis (i. 28) meat is potentially derived from 'every living thing' that moves, although we classify many creatures, including those of our own species, out of normal consideration. I do not intend to define meat any more closely than this. To do so would only invite unnecessary definitional dilemmas such as those which confront researchers into vegetarianism who have found it necessary to distinguish, firstly, those who avoid only red meat, from those who avoid also poultry, from those who avoid also fish, dairy produce, animal products, and so on (e.g. Dwyer *et al.* 1973). Fine distinctions, and a scientific terminology of ovolactovegetarians and pescovegetarians and the like, are doubtless vital in some contexts, but are not the concern here. I have met one man who will eat red meat but not fish, another who will eat poultry but avoids dairy products, and another concerned about the classification of the yeast in his daily bread. Such permutations of habit cannot be, and need not be, conveniently reconciled within a single neat categorisation.

Meat, instead, is taken to mean simply that which people regard as meat. If one person thinks only beef to be meat then

that, for them, is what meat is. If another includes also lamb, poultry, game and fish then so too, for that person, that is the definition of meat. Thus, on the whole, in the context of Britain and most Western societies, the word applies most commonly to so-called red meats – the flesh of domesticated cows and perhaps sheep – and also to pork and to game. Poultry, and especially fish, is rather less ‘meat’ to many people (some reasons for which will be considered later) though may still be included. The subject under scrutiny is not the substance, but the concept. Meat, for our purposes, is just what you, and I, and the man on the Clapham omnibus, refer to as meat.

Whilst this is not a study of vegetarianism, references to it will be found throughout the text. This is because meat eating and vegetarianism are two sides of the same coin – each being significant in opposition to the other. Research into vegetarianism, such as the above example, generally encounters a problem of definition: how to classify the variety of beliefs and motivations that are offered as explanations for that inclination. This commonly leaves writers baffled for lack of a uniting factor. The error is twofold: firstly, in expecting the term ‘vegetarianism’ to have a single definitive characteristic, rather than a range of possible features: which Needham refers to as a polythetic array of serial and more complex resemblances (1983: 36-65). But secondly, and more importantly, the problem is in looking for the nature of the preference within vegetarianism itself, when its definition, in the end, lies not in what it is, but in what it is not.

Vegetarians do not eat meat (or, at least, some meats). Although it is often overlooked, the one and only attribute which characterises all vegetarians, regardless of race, creed, class, gender, age, or occupation, is an avoidance of animal flesh in their diet. Thus, transparently, the question of what motivates vegetarians can only be adequately answered by considering what motivates meat eaters – what it is about meat that makes people want to eat it – since rejection of such beliefs is the one thing that vegetarians have in common. (I exclude those who eat meat gladly but rarely because of its expense.)

The absence of more than superficial consideration of the reasons for meat eating in much of the literature on vegetarianism may lie partly in the conventional assumption of the majority of the population that meat is a normal, natural part of the diet, and vegetarianism an aberration to be explained.

INTRODUCTION

Indeed, in British society, until recently, that has broadly been the case. Children have traditionally been brought up to regard consuming the flesh of other animals for food as both normal and desirable. Meat eating is part of what Bourdieu (1977) calls our 'habitus' – it is a principle unquestioned by most people. That this traditional view is implicit in much published research is obvious from the language commonly used: of 'faddism', 'rebelliousness', or 'deviance'. It would be easy to find any number of people who would agree that vegetarianism is generally ideological, if not overtly political. It would be harder to persuade most of those same people that meat eating is likewise. Nonetheless, any study of food habits must recognise that food selection is imbued with social rules and meaning, and it is clear from the extent of its association with cultural rituals, both religious and secular, that meat is a medium particularly rich in social meaning. From an academic viewpoint, therefore, a prejudice in favour of the majority is unsatisfactory. All that can be said is that food habits differ, and the meat-eating habit requires explanation as much as does the non-meat-eating habit.

The analysis of notions of meat may help to explain why increasing numbers of people have been avoiding meat in their diets. Conversely, study of the beliefs of vegetarians is a prerequisite to understanding the phenomenon of meat consumption. With a habit such as meat eating, which has traditionally been so taken for granted as to be seen as the natural order, the ideas which underpin the belief can be hard to elucidate. However, by bringing into consideration also the ideas of those who reject the tenets of meat eating, it is made more possible, by opposition, also to illuminate some of the distinctive features of that set of beliefs and values. Our attitudes to meat, I suggest, are a reflection of our world view, and changing habits in meat consumption may well indicate a changing perception of the world we inhabit.

The book is arranged in four main parts, which are best approached in the order written. The first part provides necessary **Background** to the topic, although some readers may prefer to jump immediately to Part II. Chapter 1 illustrates the curious way in which, time and again around the world, meat is a particularly valued food, sometimes to the point of being the only 'real' food; and, in Chapter 2, some changes in meat consumption habits

which have occurred over the years are set out. In Chapter 3 it is argued that the notion of 'taste' reflects – rather than explains – preferences. And Chapter 4 elaborates on the notion that meat, like all food, feeds not only our bodies, but also our minds; it is more than just a meal, it is part of our way of life.

The second part, **Meat is Muscle**, presents and expands the main argument of the analysis: that the high value of meat is largely contingent upon its symbolic importance as a tangible representation of human control of, and superiority over, nature. The fifth chapter looks at how we habitually relate the origins of the human species, and of human civilisation, to the advent of hunting and of farming respectively. Chapter 6 investigates the history of affirmations of human supremacy, and the importance of blood as a symbol of that supremacy, and then demonstrates the extent to which these values permeate each stage of the meat production and consumption system. In Chapter 7 an alternative ethos is described, in which humanity is conceived of as complementary to nature, rather than opposed to it; it is shown that this rival viewpoint has also influenced the meat system through much of Western history, and is expressed in our growing repugnance to reminders of meat's animal origins.

Mixed Meataphors, the third main part of the work, deals with some aspects of the meat system whose significance we seldom recognise. It shows how the symbolic importance of meat as an expression of environmental control accounts for peculiar details of the British food system that might otherwise seem obscure. Arens's (1979) contention that no adequate evidence exists for the occurrence of customary cannibalism, anywhere, is explored in Chapter 8, and the taboo is shown to conform to the traditional western orthodoxy that anything non-human is 'fair game' (unless proscribed for other reasons). This principle is then extended in Chapter 9 to explain our reluctance to eat pets, or animals that are otherwise classified as close to humans. In Chapter 10 it is suggested why meat should figure so regularly in sexual imagery in the English language.

Whereas the third part deals with aspects of the meat system which are more meaningful than we commonly realise, the fourth and final main part of the work deals with the standard explanations for the status of meat – our **Modern Meatologies** – and shows them each to have important symbolic aspects in addition to their overt and obvious meanings. Economics is one

INTRODUCTION

of the most pervasive influences of our age, but in Chapter 11 it is shown that economic techniques can only quantify the high value we place upon meat. The sources of that esteem must be sought elsewhere, and these are again related to meat's allusive function. Chapter 12 suggests that our health is likewise not the straightforward causative process of nutrition and contagion that we often assume; perceptions of the healthiness of meat express wider concerns about our relationship with the world that sustains us. In Chapter 13 some ethical and religious views of meat are discussed, and again are shown to reflect power relationships. Finally, Chapter 14 looks at some of the many ways in which meat production has recently been indicted as ecologically damaging – an involvement that is both literal and metaphorical. The concluding chapter sums up the principal findings, and speculates about possible future trends in the meat system.