

Table of Contents

All Eat All	1
It would appear that human flesh is back on the menu this month with Clemens von Wedemeyer's faux docu-anthropology at the Barbican http://www.barbican.org.uk/artgallery/event-detail.asp?ID=8903 and a new book on the history of cannibalism reviewed in the LRB. A more culturally entertaining response to the credit crunch than bank bailouts and trader suicides, I expect there may be more of this to come e.g. A Popular History of Cannibalism from Below must surely follow. Before the reposted LRB review a few classic quotes pertaining to that other history of cannibalism - Marx's <i>Capital</i>	1
Jenny Diski	2

All Eat All

By Jenny Diski

It would appear that human flesh is back on the menu this month with Clemens von Wedemeyer's faux docu-anthropology at the Barbican <http://www.barbican.org.uk/artgallery/event-detail.asp?ID=8903> and a new book on the history of cannibalism reviewed in the LRB. A more culturally entertaining response to the credit crunch than bank bailouts and trader suicides, I expect there may be more of this to come e.g. *A Popular History of Cannibalism from Below* must surely follow. Before the reposted LRB review a few classic quotes pertaining to that other history of cannibalism - Marx's *Capital*

âCapital is dead labour, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks.â- Karl Marx, *Capital*

'To exploit living labour, capital must destroy dead labour which is still useful. Loving to suck warm young blood, it kills corpses.' - Amadeo Bordiga, *Murder of the Dead*.
From:http://www.lrb.co.uk/v31/n15/disk01_.html

'Social existence under capitalism is thus gruesomely primitivistic, not simply in that we bourgeois moderns behave toward commodities in the way that "les anciens peuples...sauvages & grossiers" or "les Noirs & les CaraÃbes" of Enlightenment ethnography behaved toward their fetish idols,xxx but in the still more disgusting sense that our most routine, unavoidable and everyday [alltÃglich] act, the act of consumption of use value, that is, first of all, purchase, is in every case an act of cannibalism.' - Keston Sutherland,'Marx in Jargon'.

Reposted London Review of Books 6 August

All Eat All

Jenny Diski

- *An Intellectual History of Cannibalism* by Catalin Avramescu, translated by Alistair Ian Blyth

In 2001, Armin Meiwes, a computer technician from Rotenburg in Germany, advertised on the Cannibal Café website for someone to have dinner with. He received numerous replies, but some withdrew when he responded and he considered others not serious enough. Eventually he invited Bernd Brandes for dinner. The plan was that Armin and Bernd would dine on Bernd's severed penis, to be bitten off at the table for the occasion (this failed and it had to be cut off). Bernd found it too chewy, he said, so Armin put it in a sauté pan, but charred it and fed it to the dog. Later, Armin put Bernd in the bath (to marinate?), gave him alcohol and pills, read a science fiction book for three hours and then stabbed his dinner guest in the throat, hung him upside down on a meat hook in the ceiling, as any good butcher would, and sliced him into manageable portions. The world was agog at the news of the German cannibal and his two trials, at the first of which he was found guilty of manslaughter (no law against cannibalism in Germany, and his victim had consented, volunteered actually, to being killed and eaten) and sentenced to eight years. He was retried on appeal for first-degree murder on the grounds that Bernd might not have been in a position to consent once his penis had been severed and the blood loss taken its intellectual toll. Armin Meiwes was given life. So far so goggable, but then Meiwes gave a TV interview and explained, "I sautéed the steak of Bernd, with salt, pepper, garlic and nutmeg. I had it with Princess croquettes, Brussels sprouts and a green pepper sauce," and you begin to see, as the suburban lace curtain drifts into place, that the reality of cannibalism could be far less interesting than the idea of it. I think it's the Princess croquettes in particular that cause the disappointment.

It isn't hard to understand why, for some, the cannibal of theoretical discourse, delicately or ravenously dining on his enemies, ancestors, colonisers, spiritual converters, god, lovers, or the last remaining source of sustenance is, like the preposterous single footprint that alerts Robinson Crusoe to lethal man-eating others on his island, all the more exciting for his improbability. The theoretical cannibals are so much better to think with than domesticated, actual Armin Meiwes. Catalin Avramescu considers their historical reality an irrelevance: "Whether cannibals existed or not is a fact of marginal importance," he writes in *An Intellectual History of Cannibalism*. Actual cannibalism messes with the programme. For political scientists, such as Avramescu, or historians of ideas and the ever troubled clan of anthropologists, the sated anthropophagus offers a bellyful of moral, political and social philosophy to ruminate on.

Avramescu traces the trajectory and underlying uses of cannibal-thinking over time. Having started out as a mythic monster in uncharted places, the man-eating savage was presented during the Enlightenment as a description of a state of nature by those who were not in it, and who wished retrospectively to investigate the implications of natural law for the origins of the political state. The cannibal also greatly troubled the theologians, who worried about what would happen come the resurrection if particles of an eaten man co-existed with the body of the eater. Which soul would the single available body of the cannibal clothe? Would a man or woman eaten by a lion come back to eternal life even though their parts were consumed and atomised? Certainly, the Christian martyrs must have hoped so. Eventually, the cannibal got laughed out of the philosophical arena by the Enlightenment and anthropological relativism, and has come in our time to reside either in the demented minds of characters who now entertain us in movies and popular fiction, or in those who, finding themselves in company on isolated mountains or dense jungle, put aside their squeamishness and eat to live. Sometimes, of course, they advertise on the internet.

Avramescu, a paid-up Hobbesian, it would seem, regrets the passing of the pre-Enlightenment cannibal (the internet and movie cannibal of modernity lacks the intellectual weight of his predecessors):

The anthropophagus was an unyielding creature who brought to light the law of a harsh and profound nature. As such, perhaps he has something to tell us about ourselves, the people of a time in which nature has become merely an occasion for the picturesque. In relation to us, the subjects of technologically mediated organisation, the cannibal of the state of nature allows us to explore this impossible dimension, to traverse the crystalline sphere of the political.

The cannibal in written records was originally a story about what existed beyond the boundaries of the known. It kept the wild and the civic state apart. Sometimes, however, it brought them together: Othello seduced Desdemona with his tales

of the Cannibals that each other eat,
The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads
Do grow beneath their shoulders. This to hear
Would Desdemona seriously incline,
But still the house-affairs would draw her thence,
Which ever as she could with haste dispatch
Sheâd come again, and with a greedy ear
Devour up my discourse.

Only a few travellers had seen these monstrous, man-eating men â so they said. They were etched onto the empty spaces on the maps, and mentioned in the same breath as the unipeds and dog-headed creatures who also inhabited such regions outside the civilised world. Marco Polo mentions them, dog-headed and cannibal, and Columbus wrote that the man-eaters of the New World indeed had dog-heads â he is possibly responsible for their name, mishearing, itâs said, the word âcaribâ as âcannibalâ. For the most part, the anthropophagi of elsewhere were elaborations of travel literature heard and read, boastful, racy and imaginative as reports from a world away can hardly be these days, what with long-haul jets, mobile phones and tweets. Even before the Enlightenment there were doubts about their veracity or the travel writersâ interpretations of what they claimed to see. Avramescu quotes a papal emissary to China putting the case for modernity in the 14th century: âThe truth .Â . . is that no such people do exist as nations, though there may be an individual monster here and there.â

For Hobbes the cannibal was a very useful part of his thought experiment. The war of all against all would be at its most virulent where pre-social individuals ate each other when they met. And they would, because, as well as being driven by fear, âall have the right to all things,â and that would include the nourishing body of the weaker other. Obviously, logic would require a contract for survival. How could a cannibal society maintain itself? It would be only a matter of time before the many became the one, and the hungry one at that, all others having been eaten. The cannibal is the savage who lacks reason, a man of nature, the very opposite of the civic men who think about him.

What the civic men began to worry about was whether it wasnât their moral duty to conquer those savages and save them from the crimes they committed against nature, while at the same time appropriating their land and resources. The cannibal is a very fruitful concept for the conquistador who also wants to put himself right with God. The debate about the right to declare war on cannibals, once he had trembled at their terrible reality, was a question that came to Crusoeâs mind. The Spanish âbarbaritiesâ against the Indians in America were not justifiable, he eventually concludes. They were âvery innocent Peopleâ, he thinks, even if they did have âseveral bloody and barbarous Rites in their Customs, such as sacrificing humane Bodies to their Idolsâ, while the behaviour of the Spanish in

ârooting them out of the Countryâ was a âmere Butchery, a bloody and unnatural Piece of Cruelty, unjustifiable either to God or Manâ. Crusoe, the man who decided not to live his life in the âmiddle stateâ his father wanted for him, fetches up on his island and over more than 25 years experiences his own conversion from solitary savagery to civilised colonialism. Though his first response to the cannibal other is almost to die of terror and revulsion, he learns to think more broadly about local habits, even if in some places they happen to include eating people. As did Montaigne:

I conceive there is more barbarity in eating a man alive, than when he is dead; in tearing a body limb from limb by racks and torments, that is yet in perfect sense; in roasting it by degrees; in causing it to be bitten and worried by dogs and swine (as we have not only read, but lately seen, not among inveterate and mortal enemies, but among neighbours and fellow citizens, and, which is worse, under colour of piety and religion), than to roast and eat him after he is dead.

Locke and Rousseau had a use for the cannibal too, implicating him in the need for a contractual society and seeing in him the righter of the wrongs of the corrupted civil world. Father Labat in *Journeys to the Islands of America* justifies cannibalism as âa wholly extraordinary act on the part of these peoples; it is rage that drives them to this excess, because they cannot fully avenge themselves upon the Europeans for the injustice done to them when they were driven from their lands except by killing them, when they catch them, with greater cruelty than is natural to them.â Swift famously offered the Irish their own children to stave off the famine brought about by English landowners, as well as the suggestion that a well-suckled babe would make a fine meal for the landowners themselves âas they have already devoured most of the parentsâ. And Avramescu summarises and quotes Voltaire, from the *Dictionnaire philosophique* (on âResurrectionâ), who pre-empts both the movie *Spartacus* and the banner âWe are all foreign scumâ on the 1968 Grosvenor Square march:

Man and other animals feed on the substance of their predecessors, because human bodies turn to dust and are scattered over the earth and into the air. Thus they are assimilated and become âlegumesâ. There is not a single man who has not ingested a tiny piece of our forefathers: âThis is why it is said that we are all anthropophagi. Nothing is more reasonable after a battle: not only do we kill our brothers, but after two or three years we shall eat them, after they have put down roots on the battlefield.â

Primitive communism and Sade naturally found much that was good in cannibal societies: where property is theft the ownership of oneâs own body is negated when it becomes a foodstuff for a hungry comrade, and the natural state where all eat all is the most radical egalitarianism or institutional collapse that any revolutionary might hope for. âNow, and only now,â Lenin wrote in a letter of 1922, âwhen they have started to eat human flesh in the regions where there is famine . . . is the moment in which we can (which means we must) confiscate the goods of the Church with the most savage and merciless energy.â

For Sade, eating the other, that most forbidden food, is a perfect expression of desire, freedom and incorporation. Minsky, a Sadean Russian giant, discourses on the relative manners of Africans, on the one hand, and American, European and Asiatic, on the other: âAfter I hunted men with the former, I drank and I ate with the latter, and I fully fucked the latter, I ate people together with the Africans. I have preserved all these tastes, and all that you see here are remains of people I devoured.â

Still, for all the sophisticated thought-experiments and relativism of Avramescuâs Renaissance thinkers and Enlightenment philosophers, Crusoeâs initial visceral horror at the sight of cannibals enjoying human flesh isnât far removed from the modern tabloid fascination with Armin Meiwes, or the audienceâs shudder of delighted disgust when Hannibal Lecter dips into the brain of his dinner guest to source the *cervelles au beurre noir* he is about to serve him. Cannibalism isnât only an

intellectual tool for discussing political science. The taboo thing seems to be quite strong. Sleeping with relatives and eating one of your own remain toothsome no-nos which we gaze on with avid fascination when they come, occasionally, to light. The repressed savage in us would still lurk dangerously in our unconscious, ready to be titillated, horrified and excited, by those in whom the suppression has failed, if Freud had anything to say about it. His version of the social contract has the horde of brothers killing and eating their father in order to get to the women he has kept from them. Fortunately or otherwise, a strangely human guilt accompanies the incorporation of the father, and he sits hard on our base lusts and hungers. Fairly hard. Most of the time. The eating of and becoming the introjected other work wonders for civilisation. If you haven't time to read *Totem and Taboo*, I suggest Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*, in which Max, having answered his mother back with "I'll eat you up," is sent to bed without any supper and travels to the land of the wild things:

Then all around from far away across the world he smelled good things to eat so he gave up being king of where the wild things are. But the wild things cried: "Oh please don't go. We'll eat you up - we love you so!" And Max said: "No!" The wild things roared their terrible roars and gnashed their terrible teeth and rolled their terrible eyes and showed their terrible claws but Max stepped into his private boat and waved good-bye. And sailed back over a year and in and out of weeks and through a day. And into the night of his very own room where he found his supper waiting for him. And it was still hot.

Barack Obama read this to an audience of children on the White House lawn last Easter. Make of that what you will.

Though I've yet to put it to the test, I'm with Montaigne in finding myself less than horrified at the idea of being eaten, provided I'm dead at the time; and eating someone else (also supposing them dead) as a practical matter of survival if there was nothing else to eat doesn't give me much pause for moral thought. In love, of course, consumption is all, but like most of us, I've been satisfied with no more than a nibble or two. However, it seems that many people do shudder at the idea of being confronted with the possibilities of cannibalism, and the young Uruguayan rugby players who were airwrecked in the Andes in 1972 seem to have had a terrible time coming to terms with eating portions of their fellow passengers who hadn't survived the crash. The Catholicism of the young men appeared to be paramount, although since the Council of Trent insisted in the mid-16th century that the bread and wine of the Catholic Eucharist actually transubstantiates into the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ, and they had, therefore, been in the way of cannibalism since childhood, I'd have thought it would have been the least of their problems. Rumours of cannibalism in the final stages of the 19th-century Franklin Arctic expedition were desperately denied and covered up by the government and relatives, but these days there's probably a practical, if grim general understanding of the reasonableness of eating someone in order not to starve, at least as long as they are fairly chosen. Historically as well as imaginatively, practical cannibalism has most often occurred at sea, where a sort of common law has emerged. The lifeboat has been a place where lots are drawn to decide who will eat and who will be eaten. In 1884, three survivors of the shipwrecked *Mignonette* were found guilty of murder and sentenced to hang. They had killed and eaten the midshipman who was with them on the life raft. They were accused, Avramescu says, not because they ate their colleague (there being no law against cannibalism), or even because they murdered him, but because "they failed to draw lots to decide on the victim. Instead of doing so, they killed the weakest of their number."

Not being interested in the veracity or otherwise of narratives of cannibalism, Avramescu doesn't mention *The Man-Eating Myth*, a book by William Arens published in 1979, which was still causing all manner of upset during the mid-1980s (when I dabbled as a "amateur" undergraduate at University College London) in the insecure world of anthropology, poised as it then was between its imperialist origins and a deconstructive, Marxian guilt about its own history and right to exist as a separate,

legitimate discipline. Apart from isolated and insignificant incidents of madness or hunger, there never was any cannibalism in the world, Arens said, taking out much of the anthropological record and anyone's faith in the subject in one swipe. He examined various accounts and found them all to be stories of stories someone had heard, unwitnessed and unsubstantiated, or tales by one tribe of what the tribe over the river, or down the road got up to — accounts they gave having ascertained that there was nothing Western anthropologists so abhorred, and wanted to hear about, as cannibalistic ritual and rampage. The same tribes, Arens discovered, during his own fieldwork, considered white men, and Arens himself, to be man-eaters, partly because they are other, and the nature of the other is that he does that which is most abominable, but also because, as converts to Christianity, they knew for a fact that it was the white man's way. In his *Natural History of Religion*, Hume speaks of a Turkish prisoner under questioning, who had converted to Christianity: "How many gods are there?" he was asked. To which he replied: "None at all. . . . You have told me all along that there is but one God: and yesterday I ate him."

Long before Arens's radical doubts, Sir John Barrow reviewed (in the *Quarterly Review* for September 1836) a first-person account of the remnants of a cannibal feast. "Though we are not at all disposed to impeach Mr Earle's veracity," Barrow wrote, "we should much like to have some clear evidence that he was not *hoaxed* — *in terrorem*."[*] The vision of well-meaning but, in their thinking, fatally colonial anthropologists being perpetually "hoaxed" — *in terrorem* — or being given what they wanted by hospitable subjects, from one end of the world to the other, haunted anthropology during the time I studied it, and Arens was the textbook of the discipline's new, repentant masochism. I was never sure what to do with what looked like fairly secure archaeological evidence of ritualised and massive Aztec sacrifice and cannibalism, but who knows how much academics can get wrong? More recently, and post-colonially speaking, it has been suggested that Arens's flat denial of man-eating is a calumny that wants to erase — a particularly sure sign that the Caribbean might constitute a genuinely alternative culture.

Perhaps, after all, we are better off seeking out the theoretical cannibal in history, literature and dreams. There's more fun to be had. In the various instantiations of *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*, the cannibal is the injured party. Sweeney Todd dispatches his victims down to Mrs Lovett, who turns them into the pies she sells to her unwitting customers. "It is not the cannibal consumer who poses a threat to civilisation," Kristen Guest writes, "but rather the treacherous shopkeeper who values human life at so much per pound. Thus, through this reversal of the mainstream view of the lower classes as threatening other, the designation of the poor as cannibalistic 'savages' is contested by the play's representation of unwitting 'cannibals' as *victims* of capitalistic greed." [^];

And so we can rest content that we are all anthropophagi and anthropophagised in one, except for those of us who are autophagists. But that is another story altogether.

[*] Quoted by Geoffrey Sanborn in his essay "The Missed Encounter" in *Eating Their Words*, edited by Kristen Guest (2001).

[^] "Class and Victorian Melodrama" in *Eating Their Words*.

Jenny Diskin's *The Sixties* is published by Profile.