Enlightened Vegetarians

By Sophie Audidière

In the eighteenth century, vegetarianism was viewed as a philosophical question in its own right, at the intersection of debates about animal suffering and good health. It was also a controversial issue that saw anti-Christianism and social criticism produce similar positions.

On: Renan Larue, *Le Végétarisme des Lumières. L'abstinence de viande dans la France du XVIIIe siècle*, Paris, Classiques Garnier, 2019, 257 p., 22 €.

In the twenty-first century, vegetarianism is experienced and conceptualised in terms of malnutrition and political inertia, of unhealthy eating and environmental urgency. Renan Larue's book, however, makes an important contribution to the history of vegetarianism by showing that, at the broader level of human history, it has been present within various frameworks of constraint or freedom and has been a locus for various stakes to be played out. The book's title, *Le Végétarisme des Lumières* [Enlightenment Vegetarianism] might appear simply to be restated, in more academic terms, in its subtitle *L'abstinence de viande dans la France du XVIIIe siècle* [abstaining from meat in eighteenth-century France). However, while the 'Enlightenment' label is never innocently applied to any historical object of study, Larue's book does not claim to present a version of vegetarianism that might be described as 'enlightened' but rather to present the version (or versions) in circulation in eighteenth-century France. As the book's subtitle indicates, it focuses on eating habits that deliberately avoid 'meat' or animal flesh in general.

Vegetarianism and the Enlightenment

The question of the Enlightenment is nevertheless unquestionably present and lends the book its historiographical dimension, made clear from the introduction. A certain received idea about Enlightenment philosophy – which can be traced back to the eighteenth century itself when it was first expressed in the thought of certain anti-*philosophes* (such as Bergier, Yvon, and Fréron; see Didier Masseau, *Les Ennemis des philosophes. L'antiphilosophie au temps des Lumières,* Paris, Albin Michel, 2000) – equates *philosophes* with proponents of a narrow,

instrumental (or technocratic), and anthropocentric rationalism, inherently assuming that 'Voltaire's century was the least likely to be willing to receive vegetarian ideology' (p. 13).

However, the book's clear and erudite analysis establishes that vegetarianism was considered from various viewpoints, seriously debated, and even championed in eighteenth-century France, across a vast spectrum of *philosophes* and scholars. One of the welcome effects of this demonstration is its deconstruction of this received idea, which has proved so productive that, when reading eighteenth-century works today, we still find ourselves hesitating between endorsing and rejecting the 'Enlightenment' as defined by its enemies – above all the anti-*philosophes* – and avoiding the word 'Enlightenment' as we focus, more academically, on the 'Eighteenth century' whose 'enlightened' or 'modern' dimensions we avoid examining. And yet, at the same time, we cannot entirely detach ourselves from what we continue to find interesting about the ideas of the eighteenth-century *philosophes*.

However, to pursue this line is perhaps to pull the book in directions other than the one it proposes. Larue's book does not claim to be historiographical, nor does it seek to determine whether the eighteenth century was a source of contemporary vegetarianism, any more than it attempts to trace the differences between them and us. In this sense, it does indeed argue for linking the terms 'vegetarianism' and 'Enlightenment,' if we take the latter to be synonymous with 'the ideas of the *philosophes*': the aim is to show that, today as in the eighteenth century, certain so-called carnivorist arguments 'cause philosophers to shrug their shoulders' (p. 13).

The book thus endeavours to reveal a history of vegetarianism as an issue that is necessarily distorted and downplayed if we write about it in the terms used by its opponents. In 1804, the Civil Code defined animals as 'movable and sometimes immovable property'. The fact that the state wrote itself into the debates of the eighteenth century, legally bringing them to an end, retrospectively reveals, as Larue demonstrates, the extent to which vegetarianism was a focal point of controversy in the philosophical writing and literature of the time – a controversy to which the nineteenth century would then strive to put an end.

A doubly modern dynamic

The books begins with an effective typology of the practices that relate to abstaining from the consumption of animal flesh, whose four components, of course, intersect: dietary vegetarianism, where the central concern is health; ascetic vegetarianism, focused on mortification of the flesh and spiritual elevation; religious vegetarianism, organised around sacred precepts; and finally, ethical vegetarianism, linked to the issue of animal sensibility and suffering. This typology is further supplemented by a long historical overview that brings out the capacity of Ancient vegetarianism to 'undermine the religion of the Greeks and the Romans' (p. 18) renewed in its ability to unsettle Christianity, whose universal destiny presupposes an omnivorous destiny reaching beyond the dietary prescriptions of other faiths ('vegetarianism is a form of anti-Christianism' states the author, p. 18). While it remains compatible with an ascetic vegetarianism based on abstaining from meat at certain times for religious reasons, and does not prevent a history of compassion for animals, this Christian

dietary 'becoming' gives vegetarianism a whiff of heresy, at least for so long as there were heretical sects, up to and including the Jansenists, who harboured vegetarian tendencies.

In the modern period, the author identifies a dual dynamic that was favourable to eighteenth-century vegetarianism: first, the de-Christianised Parisian elites' interest in a healthier diet; second the 'civilising process' that affected social mores in these same social classes. The opening chapter discusses 'old and new questions about diet' and establishes, first, that vegetarianism was a familiar concept in the eighteenth century and second, that it was increasingly discussed in medical terms rather than in terms of mortification. The question of what constitutes the 'most natural' diet (p. 34) became the topic of lively debate in the eighteenth century, as a medical issue, based on a framework of ideas borrowed from Plutarch. These debates called for the taking of physiological and naturalist positions, as we can see in the discussions between Gassendi, Wallis, and Tyson, or in the controversy between Buffon and Rousseau. The discussions did not, however, amount to an apologia, as evidenced by the controversy sparked by Hecquet, a Jansenist doctor, at the beginning of the century: his defence of vegetarianism, based on a somewhat disparate collection of medical, poetic, and theological evidence, was discredited on chiefly medical grounds due to its mechanistic explanation of digestion. During this century of gluttony, and in counterpoint to the medical viewpoint, a discourse developed concerning the virtues of frugality. Chefs and gastronomes discussed the vegetarian diet, even in *L'Encyclopédie*, as an occasional remedy to gastronomic excesses or as a diet for children or writers. Once this discourse on frugality had been accepted at a profound level, a second and clear apologia for vegetarianism, defended by the Italian doctor Cocchi, was better received.

The author then explores the 'civilising process' in more depth and focuses on hunting, vivisection, and professions linked to meat-eating (slaughterers, butchers). The book primarily examines these three areas by studying discourses about, and sometimes accounts of, practices, focusing much more rarely on the practices themselves. It clearly demonstrates that numerous publications discussed and opposed the latter, thus revealing a new form of, or shift in, sensibility. Further historical research would be necessary, however, to determine the extent to which the positions advanced by the authors, or the testimonies they report in their fiction and essays, are representative of a 'state of *mentalities*' (p. 105, my emphasis) that is difficult to establish based solely on the corpus of scholarly and literary works chosen here.

The discussions of which the book offers an account relate to the observation and understanding of animal behaviour, as well as to natural history, and played a role in debates about theories of knowledge and the birth of ideas—in areas ranging from philosophical history to Biblical narrative. Arguments in favour of vegetarianism could be found everywhere and did not present a united front whereas, according to the author, there was far more coherency among those who opposed anything resembling a philosophical equiparation of humans and other animals (mainly religious apologists and clergymen). For this reason, when Larue seeks to separate moral vegetarianism from the religious question ('strictly from the moral point of view, however, independently of any religious considerations, the problem raised by vegetarians remains unsolved: do we have the right to kill animals in order to feed on them? Is it ethically just to be carnivorous?' p. 91), we cannot help but find that the vegetarians in question are more our contemporaries than they are Condorcet's. Nevertheless, and this is one of the most convincing results of Larue's investigation, Condorcet was precisely one of those who, without being vegetarian himself, explicitly addressed the question as a separate moral question. On this point, as on that of the animal-machine and its treatment in terms of animal ethics or the infra-juridical conclusions it draws from its

examination of our right to eat animals, the book manages to show that historical precedents offer some measure of response to our current questions, despite the differing intellectual contexts. In other words, those wishing to defend vegetarianism today could well find inspiration in its eighteenth-century forms.

Vegetarianism problematised

Vegetarianism emerged as a system less in treatises defending it than within social mores, as generally found in imaginary spaces. Larue moves between travel-writing and fiction, both underpinned here by utopian considerations, showing the extent to which vegetarianism can shed new light on objects, mores, ideas, and representations. Here the book's value no longer consists in showing that medical, ontological, moral, and religious arguments existed in favour of a diet without animal flesh, but rather in showing the power of that diet to pose questions, as evidenced in the chapters devoted to vegetarian spaces and then, respectively, to Voltaire and Rousseau.

In this book, travel-writing poses questions about the Brahman caste and the sacralisation of the cow, for example, which were taken up in utopian literature (Desfontaines, Morelly, and Sade) to the extent that, according to Larue, vegetarianism could even be qualified as a 'common trope in the utopian genre' (p. 137). Larue draws on a theory of utopia, and in fact of literature, as helping to resolve real contradictions as opposed to advancing a political or social programme, and suggests that these utopias 'resolve the sociological problem of the shift in the threshold of sensibilities' (p. 126) which, in real life, only results in contradictions.

As for Voltaire, he appears to have been particularly prolix in discussing different types of vegetarianism, drawing on economic, naturalist, ontological, exegetic, religious, and spiritual concerns to try to understand the prevalence of 'carnivorous anthropocentrism or teleology' (p. 161) and even of the 'appetite for "cadavers in disguise"' (p. 170), two expressions that reveal what lies at the heart of the Deist Voltaire's existential angst faced with a world seemingly reborn only for the purposes of murder. The guiding thread appears to be the fight against Christianity, which reinforces the previously cited hypothesis of vegetarianism's anti-Christian potential. This requires the secularisation of vegetarianism and the writing of its social and political history. Incidentally, we can see how advantageous it is, for Voltaire in particular, to rid himself of the distinction between philosophy and controversy.

At the other end of the philosophical spectrum, Larue posits vegetarianism as the foundation of Rousseau's entire anthropological and philosophical construct (p. 198), thereby making it fully necessary as the result of a sort of argumentative regression, itself not without ambivalence or tensions. The natural history and taxonomy invoked by Rousseau, framing mankind as opportunistic vultures devoid of any carnivorous instinct, argue for human emancipation from determinism, for good or bad, as far as we and other living creatures are concerned. The fundamental place occupied, within the genetic order, by frugivorism and pastoralism—which unsurprisingly leads to the vegetarian diet being presented in *Julie ou la*

Nouvelle Héloïse as pertaining to women, children, and the poor, and is re-enacted in 'the scene of ancient table-companionship' (p. 224)—lends a regressive connotation to Rousseau's somewhat complacent and embellished self-portrait as a vegetarian (p. 220). In short, much like Voltaire, Rousseau as a vegetarian remains consistent with himself.

The book fulfils its stated objective to rewrite the history of the vegetarian question in a way that highlights its rich and consistent role in our history more broadly. In doing so, it faces the same inevitable issues and methodological difficulties as any study of such scope, especially with regard to this century. Three of these, in particular, warrant further development. First, although readers will be grateful to the author, given the book's focus on a century as resolutely literary as it was philosophical, for drawing on such a broad range of fiction and essays, this breadth perhaps requires a distinction to be made between essayistic evidence and what the author also refers to as 'evidence', even when this is drawn from fiction (for example with regard to Voltaire, p. 173). Second, with the Revolution came new issues that remain implicit here. For example, La Harpe's 'new carnivorous arguments' in 1834, which consisted above all in demolishing the philosophers as 'vegetarian poseurs' (p. 105), should probably be considered in the post- and counter-revolutionary context: a time of intensive rewriting of the history of what was then just beginning to be called the Enlightenment. Finally, given the author's argument, the question of labour might have warranted further discussion. For example, it seems that even in the eighteenth century the question of sensibility could be viewed differently depending on whether the animals in question were, on the one hand, pets or even hunting animals and subjects for vivisection, or, on the other hand, working animals that were the driving force for labour or even its product. Similarly, explicitly foregrounding labour and exploitation, both very present in utopias—from 'fantasies about climates where it is possible to live off delicious food without needing to work or have others work' (p. 125) to Morelly's philosophy of 'mutual dependency' between all living creatures—might provide further resources for the author's overall intention to produce an enlightened philosophy of the living, whether endowed with sensibility or providing labour.

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