



An Intellectual History of Cannibalism

Cătălin Avramescu, Alistair Ian Blyth (Translator)

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The cannibal has played a surprisingly important role in the history of thought--perhaps the ultimate symbol of savagery and degradation-- haunting the Western imagination since before the Age of Discovery, when Europeans first encountered genuine cannibals and related horrible stories of shipwrecked travelers eating each other. *An Intellectual History of Cannibalism* is the first book to systematically examine the role of the cannibal in the arguments of philosophers, from the classical period to modern disputes about such wide-ranging issues as vegetarianism and the right to private property.

Catalin Avramescu shows how the cannibal is, before anything else, a theoretical creature, one whose fate sheds light on the decline of theories of natural law, the emergence of modernity, and contemporary notions about good and evil. This provocative history of ideas traces the cannibal's appearance throughout Western thought, first as a creature springing from the menagerie of natural law, later as a diabolical retort to theological dogmas about the resurrection of the body, and finally to present-day social, ethical, and political debates in which the cannibal is viewed through the lens of anthropology or invoked in the service of moral relativism.

Ultimately, *An Intellectual History of Cannibalism* is the story of the birth of modernity and of the philosophies of culture that arose in the wake of the Enlightenment. It is a book that lays bare the darker fears and impulses that course through the Western intellectual tradition.

An Intellectual History of Cannibalism Details

Date : Published April 12th 2009 by Princeton University Press (first published 2003)

ISBN : 9780691133270

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Format : Hardcover 350 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, Philosophy, Anthropology, Historical

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kaelan says

Alongside incest, cannibalism is one of the ultimate taboos, attracting fierce interdiction throughout history and across cultures. Given this nearly universal prohibition, I was interested to learn how the concept has evolved over time and whether it is truly as clear-cut as might first appear. Unfortunately, *An Intellectual History of Cannibalism*, written by the Romanian philosopher and political scientist Călin Avramescu, failed to shed much light on the topic.

For despite the morbid allure of its subject matter, Avramescu's book suffers from a range of flaws, some more egregious than others:

#1. It is, formally speaking, a complete mess. The book reads like a collection of reading notes haphazardly stitched together, with little signposting and pretty much zero argumentative overview. And although Avramescu divides up his work into eight chapters, each section bears only the slightest degree of thematic unity. In the chapter titled "The Athropophagus in the City," for instance, he jumps from discussing classical notions of despotism to claiming—rather absurdly—that "[t]he cannibal ... is the founder of modern communism." Yikes!

#2. It is boring. Perhaps the blame ought to lie with the translator, but *An Intellectual History*..., with its confusing layout, dry pose and lengthy digressions, somehow manages to make cannibalism seem quite dull.

#3. It is underinclusive. Avramescu, despite his penchant for intellectual detours, commits some surprising omissions. He discusses natural law theories at great length, including the work of Grotius and especially Pufendorf, but ignores Kant—one of the more interesting natural law theorists—pretty much completely. (He does, however, find time to cite such diverse figures as Freud and the fifth-century-BC Chinese philosopher Mo Tsu.) He also fails to investigate the literary significance of cannibalism in both classical (think: Ovid's *Metamorphoses*) and post-18th-century artworks (think: *Moby-Dick*, *Heart of Darkness* or, more recently, *The Silence of the Lambs*), even as he returns again and again to Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. More conspicuously, Avramescu devotes a mere two paragraphs to the question of cannibalism vis-à-vis the Christian doctrine of transubstantiation, despite the wealth of contemporaneous scholarship on the matter.

#4. It isn't even really about cannibalism in the first place. Avramescu's main argument is that "the cannibal," which he alternatively calls "the athropophagus," has played a key role in the development of natural law theories. Yet this thesis fails to implicate cannibalism as such. More fundamental is the figure of "the savage," who may—but need not—engage in cannibalistic practices. In emphasizing the importance of the cannibal, Avramescu tends to argue as follows:

Premise #1: The savage is central to such and such philosophical question (e.g., the role of necessity in natural law).

Premise #2: Savages can be cannibals.

Conclusion: Thus, the cannibal is central to such and such philosophical question.

Yet apart from the eating of human flesh, savages (as Avramescu tells us) also practice incest, public nudity and fierce egalitarianism. On the above logic, then, the book could just as easily have been titled *An Intellectual History of Nudity*—although that doesn't quite have the same ring to it.

#5. It is unreliable. I could maybe forgive the foregoing had Avramescu furnished the reader with reliable analysis and interpretation. But unfortunately, his glosses are often suspect. The most glaring offence: as at least one academic reviewer has pointed out, Avramescu seems to construe Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal"—that masterwork of English-language satire—as a sincere example of political economy. Elsewhere, Avramescu has a tendency to resort to mere speculation. "We do not have an exact knowledge of the content of Carneades' speeches," he writes at one point, "and thus cannot know whether he touched on the problem of cannibalism." "However," he adds, justifying a digression on cannibalism, necessity and natural law, "this is a possibility."

In short, an intriguing concept but stymied by poor execution.

Anuradha Vikram says

This book is an excellent complement to post-Marxist subaltern theory as it articulates how the colonized subject is reduced to abjection through the rational ordering of difference under Enlightenment Humanism.

Dean says

This is ok, but a bit dry. Worth owning in case you need it for academic work. Otherwise, don't bother.

Michipicoten says

This book is what it says it is: an intellectual history. It describes what various writers and thinkers throughout history have said on the subject. It has some very entertaining stories...

Soeine says

This book deals with the genealogy of the literature about cannibalism, rather than the history of cannibalism itself: how the conception of cannibalism developed, influenced by the political and economic invasion by the old western world of the newly discovered lands of what were called "savages." Furthermore, the book deals with how the physical entity of body has disappeared from people's everyday consciousness and has been abstracted to a mere concept. This re-framing coincides with humanity's struggle to walk away from its animality and to remain as a pure, de-animalised cultural species. The French revolution is introduced as an example. Its cannibalistic acts were disguised and justified by its ideologies. The book ends somewhat abruptly, with a commentary that needs further development, to wit: contemporary citizens are subject to institutionalized cannibalism under the monstrous tyranny of the nation-state. The writing loses its rhythm in some places, becoming tedious. Nonetheless, it provides compelling and refreshing insights into our conception of the body.

Anastasia Fitzgerald-Beaumont says

Those who have read *Robinson Crusoe* will recall the point when the hero discovers that he is not alone on his island when he rather ludicrously finds a single footprint! A duffelpud, perhaps? Defoe is really setting the mood, one of horror and one of fascination. And it's with horror and fascination that the cannibals made their way into the western imagination, from Robinson's Island to the feasts of Hannibal Lector.

I had so much fun – if that's the word! - in picking my way through *An Intellectual History of Cannibalism* by Catalin Avramescu, translated by Alastair Blyth and published by the Princeton Press. It really helped me to put the practice in a the wider context of history, civilization and imagination

I love Hannibal Lector as much as the next girl but - oh my - when it comes to the real thing some of the details of the cannibal life are truly hard to take in. I remember when I was in my teens reading about the case of one Armin Meiwes, who lived in the German town of Rotenburg an der Fulda. This man went into a website called Cannibal Café and there advertised for a “well-built eighteen to thirty-year-old to be slaughtered and then consumed.”

Who on earth is going to volunteer for that? Well, someone did, someone by the name of Bernd Brandes. The actual details of what followed are truly repellent. Let me just say that dinner began while Brandes was still alive, the hors d'oeuvre being a certain part of the anatomy that most men find dear. Found to be too rubbery, it was sautéed and fed to the dog!

To a certain extent, as Avramescu explores, cannibalism began really as an invented concept, a dividing line between civilization and savagery. It was another form of ‘here be dragons,’ filling out the space on empty maps, those barbarous places “...of the Cannibals that each other eat.” Cannibals, in other words, entered the western imagination alongside such fabulous creatures as the dog-headed men and monopods.

For Thomas Hobbes the cannibal was a useful concept, a warning of the depths that the war of all against all could descend to in the absence the social contract and the state. But it became something more in the real world; for the discovery of supposed cannibal ‘savages’ became an excuse for far greater savagery, as the Spanish fully demonstrated in the Americas. The hypocrisy, not just in this, but in much of the practice of ‘civilization,’ was touched on by 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 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 the inveterate and mortal enemies, but among neighbours and fellow citizens, and which is worse, under the colours of piety and religion), than to roast and eat him after he is dead.

I suppose the modern cannibal, cannibals in the form of the fictional Lector or the factual Meiwes, are really the creation of civilization rather than savagery, a notion supported by arguments advanced by the Marquis de Sade, who saw the absorption of ‘the other’ as a perfect expression of one's freedom. Alas, there are some forms of freedom one would rather not have.

Avramescu has performed commendably in exploring the darker side of human imagination; for this is a journey less into the practice than the perception. It touches on assumptions about barbarism that allowed

supposedly civilized societies to behave towards others in a wholly barbarous way. As much as anything *An Intellectual History of Cannibalism* is an exploration of evil, of ideas and practices that go well beyond the consumption of human flesh.

Rubi says

Stima pentru munca de cercetare a autorului. Cartea e foarte academica, dar asta nu ar fi o problema, problema consta in faptul ca cercetarea s-a bazat pe texte scrise intre Antichitate si Revolutia Industrială, nimic de actualitate.

In esenta e o analiza a acelor texte cu si despre canibali, si a modului in care gandeau oamenii acelor vremuri, nu se ocupa de canibalismul propriu-zis. Repet, foarte academica, in niciun caz nu e o lectura usoara. Nu e un repros adus autorului, e un repros adus asteptarilor mele.
