



## THE RAW AND THE COOKED: AN INTERVIEW WITH CĂTĂTLIN AVRAMESCU

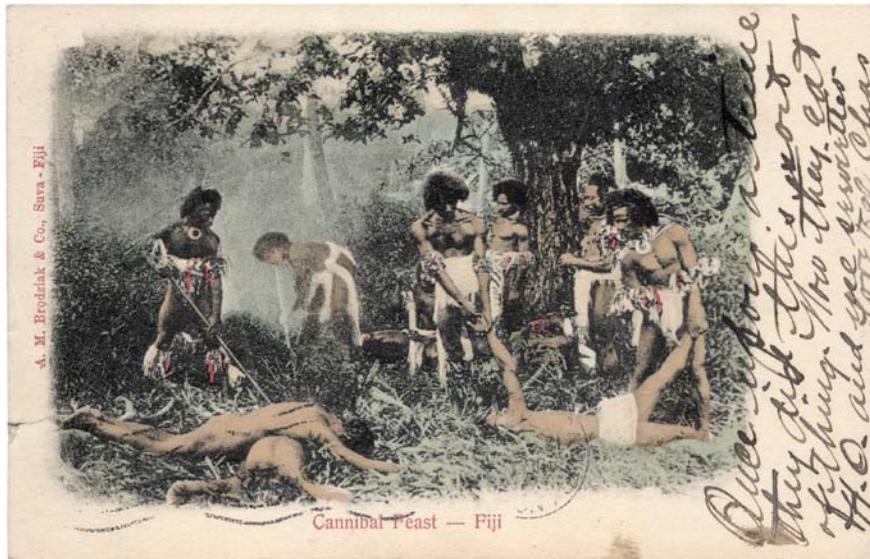
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The beginning of the modern age is heralded by the discovery of the New World, whose human inhabitants were principally noteworthy for their custom, real or imagined, of eating other humans. Scarcely had Columbus returned from his first encounter with the Arawaks of Hispaniola when this point of apparent cultural difference became for European moralists the centerpiece of their search for the ultimate grounds of morality and for the causes of the diversity of moral systems. The figure of the cannibal, in this sense, plays a leading role in the emergence of early modern moral and political philosophy.

The Romanian philosopher and political scientist Cătălin Avramescu is the first scholar to notice the importance of the cannibal in modern European thought, and to attempt to write a comprehensive intellectual history of anthropophagy. His book first appeared in Romanian in 2003 under the title *Filozoful crud* ("the cruel philosopher" or "the raw philosopher," depending on context), and in 2009 was published by Princeton University Press as *An Intellectual History of Cannibalism*. In June 2010, Justin E. H. Smith spoke with Avramescu in Bucharest about, among other things, the difficulty of intellectualizing such a bloody topic as this. This interview was subsequently fleshed out in a series of e-mail exchanges.

***An Intellectual History of Cannibalism*, as you go to some lengths to make clear, is not really about cannibalism, but rather about the figure of the cannibal in early modern political theory. Yet in some sense, clearly, it does make a difference whether people were actually doing the deed or not, and in turn whether the figure in question was carved from some sort of ethnographic data, however rough. Do you really think it's possible to do the intellectual history of cannibalism without doing the history of cannibalism itself?**

Yes and no. Cannibalism was often taken as a "thought experiment," much like Maxwell's demon or Schrödinger's cat. Philosophers have often fantasized about human flesh and the dire necessity that could compel a human being to eat another human being, though they have almost never observed it directly. Sometimes they even imagined situations that are plainly impossible, like that of the sailors adrift in a boat who supposedly cast lots to choose one to be sacrificed.



"Cannibal Feast — Fiji." Postcard sent on 15 July 1907.

In real circumstances, they would die of thirst long before dying of hunger. That said, I am reluctant to draw a sharp distinction between "real" and "imagined" or "symbolic" cannibalism. There is no separate *Ding an Sich* of anthropophagy, one that is not preceded by need, fear, or lust, or one that does not leave in its wake guilt, pleasure, or terror. On the other hand, actual cannibalism always lurks at the periphery of our sanitized, modern world of representations. A few years ago, a collection of photos from World War II was declassified. These pictures were so extreme that they had been kept in a vault at the Finnish Ministry of Defense for more than sixty years. Among the atrocities frozen in time by the camera are images of cannibalism in the ranks of Soviet soldiers.

**Have you sensed that readers have had trouble coming to terms with how there could be an *intellectual* history of cannibalism at all?**

I think cannibalism is challenging not just on an epistemological level. The cannibal provokes us at a deeper, ontological, level. How can cannibalism's existence be justified? This question is particularly difficult, since the coming into being of the cannibal implies the disappearance of other beings. If this is true, then an examination of cannibalism is bound to induce a species of metaphysical unease.

**One of my favorite things about the book is the bounty of details and anecdotes. You mention at some point**

**a partial defense by Robert Boyle of the practice of cannibalism, on the grounds that our current eating practices are already perfectly disgusting, for example, eating the entrails of crustaceans, mixing dung into cheese to give it flavor, and so on. Observations like this one depict cannibalism as existing on a continuum with other dietary practices, rather than being a radical departure from our usual practices, and this in turn inserts early modern discussions of cannibalism into the much broader, and older, history of what might be called "dietary philosophy," a concern that is omnipresent in Greek philosophy, and perhaps never really went away. Do you see the issue of cannibalism as embedded within a larger debate about carnivorousness, the danger of beans, according to the Pythagoreans, and in general about, let's say, the proper maintenance of the corporeal substance? Or are there distinct issues that arise here?**

Until recently, moralists did not exactly have a craving for vegetarianism. Avoiding meat was mainly a religious imperative and even that was interpreted creatively. Medieval Eastern Orthodox monks, for instance, declared the European beaver, now almost extinct, to be a sort of furry fish, since it was an aquatic creature. That definition made it acceptable for a diet that forbade the consumption of red meat during specific periods.

What was significant for the moralist was not always what you eat, but how. In other words, what was at stake in early modern ethical discourse was not primarily the substance of the food, but the manners

of the table. In the seventeenth century, for instance, refined cuisine was not for the faint-hearted. How animals were raised, sacrificed, cooked, and consumed reveals a brutal side of the early modern heart. I suspect things have not changed much to this day; back then, however, this brutality was more open for anyone to see. In an age of increasing refinement, this paradox troubled a few minds. They wept and yet they ate the objects of their compassion.

Moralists, then, focused on the manners of the table as a manifestation of the moral order (or disorder) of a society. That was the “larger debate” you mentioned. The question, then, for the early modern philosopher, is: where do you start deriving a moral science from? Here is where cannibalism comes into play, as a result of the shock it inflicts upon the modern moralist. It raises in him an elementary passion, and forces him to think about the human being in very exceptional circumstances and in an extreme state of derangement.

The sensationalist bent of the travel narratives was a clever epistemological device. Wonder and astonishment were considered, from classical antiquity to Descartes, as sources of knowledge. Disgust, then, should be seen from this perspective as a species of wonder, one that is productive at the root of ethics.

**Another interesting thing that comes out in the book is the slipperiness of the concept of cannibalism. You mention the documented cases of townspeople drinking the blood of executed criminals in Germany as late as the 1860s. They were doing this for purportedly medical reasons, and would have balked at any description of themselves as cannibals. Examples like this suggest that consumption of human flesh and blood might in fact be very widespread, even if much of it is not conceptualized as cannibalism. This in turn suggests that cannibalism is never wrong *tout court*, but only wrong when done the way hostile others do it. Do you think there was any awareness of this among the early modern authors to address the subject?**

Early modern authors were aware of the slipperiness of the concept of cannibalism and they played it to great effect. The consuming of the body of Christ in the ritual of the Christian communion or the medical use of the extract of mummies were, for instance, reconstructed as acts of cannibalism by radical writers and reformers. Some utilized symbolic associations such as that between bloodletting and money lending. On the other hand, there was, indeed, some acceptance of what I should call, perhaps, “minor cannibalism.” For instance:

a man drowns in a river, is eaten by fish, and then another man eats the fish. What made the difference? Two elements. One is essential in casuistry: intention. The minor cannibals, such as the sick men flocking around the scaffold, do not themselves wish to harm the source of the matter they ingest. This contrasts with the perverted will of the “major” cannibal. The other element is the drama of dismemberment, which is a procedure that carries numerous associations in Western culture.

**One thing that is very striking in early authors such as Hans Staden—whose book featured perhaps the most famous sixteenth-century woodcuts of cannibalistic feasts—is the easy elision of a cluster of things that Europeans consider uncivilized in the extreme, usually cannibalism, communal property, and incest. Why do they see these as a sort of package?**

For two reasons. First is the influence of classical sources. To some extent, modern travel literature follows the conventions of the authors of classical antiquity such as, for instance, Herodotus, who describes the *androphagoi* as savages, nomads, cannibals, and as acknowledging no law. The second reason is theoretical. Natural man is, by definition, outside the bounds of the state. This means that whenever philosophers have imagined such a being, they arrived at this concept by eliminating the features that defined the experience of the citizen: property, law, domestic order.

The original Romanian title of the book, *Filozoful crud*, involved a play on words suggesting that philosophers themselves have been both the victims (to the extent that they are “raw”) and the perpetrators (to the extent that they are “cruel”) of cannibalism. This dual sense of the Romanian adjective *crud* cannot be carried over into English, but I’m left wondering what exactly you meant by it in the original. Is there a sense in which you think philosophers in modern history have found themselves in both of these two contrasting roles?

Modern philosophy co-exists with the specialized sciences. These are polished, sophisticated, “civilized,” if you wish. Philosophy has always had a hard time legitimizing itself in this context. As a discipline, it was cannibalized by sociology, logic, aesthetics, physics, economics, anthropology, and political science. For some, it has already melted into literature. For others, it could survive only inasmuch as it is focused on the game of language. My project was to recover—to capture—a tone, a standpoint more “primitive” than



Francisco Goya, *Cannibals Preparing their Victims*, ca. 1800–1808.  
Goya's painting shows the bodies of Jesuit missionaries Jean de Brebeuf  
and Gabriel Lallemand being skinned by the Iroquois in 1649. Courtesy  
Bridgeman Art Library.

that of modern sciences. Philosophy was once the art of asking extreme, dangerous questions. The task of the philosopher is not simply to argue, as much of contemporary academic philosophy would want us to believe, but also to convince, to move, to stir and, eventually, to shake us to the core. This is the point where the cannibal enters the scene. He asks questions about the identity of the individual when the subject is on the verge of dissolution. He explores the possibility of an ethics without morals. He is the operator of anarchy on the background of social order. Philosophers have often entered the city under different guises, as foreigners, travelers, cynics, or unbelievers. The cannibal is just a part of a larger and complex history. He is not pleasant to look at. Yet, he opens for us the possibility of thinking anew about our values. To be on the cutting edge of thinking: that was the uncomfortable trade of the philosopher. That, I imagine, is to be a free spirit. It is to find food for thought where no one is looking. Or where everybody has been turned away.

**What is next for cannibalism studies? Are there themes from the book that you would like to see developed further, by yourself or by someone else?**

I am reluctant to advance a program. Scholarly research owes more to chance encounters that it often admits. I must say, though, that I would be interested to read a systematic analysis of how the non-Europeans have perceived, from a moral point of view, the diet of the Europeans. As for myself, I am now working on a different but related project, on the idea of anarchy and order in the Enlightenment.

**In the book, you seek to draw a connection between, on the one hand, the transition from the figure of the cannibal to that of the filthy mendicant on the margins of society, as we move from the early modern period to, let's say, the high modern period, and, on the other hand, the transition from natural-law theory to legal positivism. What is it about the shift in legal philosophy that explains the disappearance of the cannibal as a meaningful menace?**

Classical, medieval, and early modern legal philosophy were more concerned with questioning the nature and the source of law. Is it of divine origin? Is it unchangeable? Universal? That is why the experiences of individuals or nations that seem not to live under the government of laws were as fascinating as they were productive from a theoretical point of view. Today,

legal philosophers are more concerned with how laws are interpreted, by whom and to what effect. Laws are perceived like public goods that are always available for our consumption. Our predecessors were more skeptical in this respect.

**In this connection, one cannot help but detect a fairly strong strain of remorse in the book for the loss of a natural-law framework for thinking about the various transgressions human beings make against one another, and arguably against themselves. Would you care to make more explicit than you do in the book your reasons for feeling that modern legal positivism marks a turn for the worse?**

The goal of my book is not to make a decision in such venerable disputes as the one between universalism and relativism, but rather to refine our knowledge as to the context and the nature of some of these theoretical developments. But I also raise the question of the significance of the decline of natural law theories, and that led me to reflect on the status of the state as a moral subject. When sovereignty is liberated from the constraints of a higher law, then there are two options left: amoralism or the belief that the Good is immanent. The idea of the welfare state, for instance, seems to me such a perversion made possible by the instrumentalization of the idea of sovereignty. At its heart is the faith that the state is better than its citizens.

**Does the critique of legal positivism arise out of the unique context of political theory as conducted at present in Romania? Is there a particular historical or political reason why one should feel compelled to take up a position in the rift between legal positivists and natural-law theorists?**

Nobody is compelled to do anything. Taking up a position should be the expression of individual freedom. Now that you ask, I admit that there could be some contextual explanation for my insistence on the conflict between positivism and natural-law theories. Eastern Europe after 1989 witnessed a complicated transition to democracy. In a number of countries this transition has been halted at the stage of managed democracy by political and legal elites for whom laws are simply what the legislator wishes them to be.

**Perhaps you could say more about the way in which your book engages with some of the important moments in the emergence of a new conception of**

**international law. One of the most interesting parts of the book to me was the one that dealt with cases of cannibalism under extreme conditions at sea, and the way in which these cases were dealt with in the criminal courts back home. Beyond the figure of the savage, these cases are perhaps another respect in which the preoccupation with cannibalism is directly linked to early modern globalization: if everyone had stayed at home, there would have been no question as to the nature of legal jurisdiction over cannibalistic acts.**

Right. The modern subject is never alone. Even in the act of the *cogito*, it is haunted by itself. The image of the shipwrecked sailors, casting lots to determine who is to be eaten, is proof of the juridicalization of what was in earlier times the open, free, and unfathomable space beyond the farthest horizon. In modern times, there is no place left that is far enough. The British Navy will see to that, as even the fugitives from the *Bounty* finally come to learn.

**You mean in the sense of the expansion of British legal jurisdiction to cover extreme circumstances in international waters?**

Yes. The story of the *Bounty* is not, to be clear, one of bringing cannibalism under the jurisdiction of a European power. The point of the story is that the law of England could reach the remotest corner of the globe, even those hidden in Tahiti and beyond, on an island isolated, uninhabited, and two hundred miles off its location on the map. The crime of the sailors on the *Bounty* was mutiny, not cannibalism. It must be said, though, that one of the sailors in Captain Bligh's boat was eaten by the cannibals of Fiji. Bligh himself altered his course so as to avoid Tonga, where he knew there were cannibals. Much can be said, however, about the significance for international law of the discoveries of, and cannibalism in, the Pacific. Significant, for instance, is the Waitangi Treaty of 1840, whereby the Maori chiefs accepted British sovereignty.

**You've recently turned your attention to the American constitution and are preparing a critical edition and translation of it in Romanian. Is there any continuity between the two projects?**

The problems of order and disorder. The cannibal is the messenger of disorder, the proof that moral chaos has descended upon us, human nature at its worst, the unusable atom of an impossible social order. The Founders generally had a dim view of human nature

and they greatly feared the potential of disorder, for instance as war between the former colonies. This is why the Constitution is, in a sense, a peace treaty, an exploration of the improbable equilibrium between political actors, individual and institutional. In the closing days of the 1787 Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, Benjamin Franklin was famously asked by a woman: "Well, Doctor, what have we got—a Republic or a Monarchy?" And Franklin replied: "A Republic, if you can keep it." (Self-)repression vs. the demands of nature. Different takes on the same story.

**You are, in general, critical of systems that involve a high degree of dependency of citizens on their government. In what way is your critique of the modern welfare state—which is one of the undercurrents, if not a leitmotif, of your work on cannibalism—connected to your avowed Euroskepticism? Do you see a prevailing tendency towards the instrumentalization of sovereignty in the way politicians think about the general good of a unified Europe?**

I fear the lack of courage. That is what makes me critical of the modern welfare state. It is too safe, too comfortable, too orderly. I imagine the realization of our freedom requires us to stare evil in the face. The Stoic tradition has theorized this tragic dimension of the individual. Seneca, in a striking passage, claims that the good, but mortal, human is, morally speaking, above God himself, as God is not touched by evil, while the good man rises above it. As for sovereignty, I rather sense the decomposition of it. Sovereignty, we should not forget, was considered as an extraordinary species of power and as an uncommon species of will. It evoked a feeling of urgency, of majesty, that has trouble surviving in the rarefied, utilitarian, atmosphere of "unified Europe." I also suspect that the drive towards pacifism at whatever cost will not make us safer, either morally or strategically. The national states of "old Europe," in spite of their shortcomings, evolved as strong and efficient states. They were the result of a Hobbesian selection from a population of predatory states. Prussia, England, and Sweden are eminent products of this evolution. We have now arrived at a moment when weakness is the norm, the "new black," as the saying goes. The result of this programmatic weakness of the state is the rise of asymmetrical threats. The ecosystem of weak states opens new niches to old and new forms of exploitation, from hacking and terrorism to the systematic abuse of welfare programs.



Illustration by Theodor de Bry from his book *Americae Tertia Pars*, 1592. De Bry's popular book republished earlier narratives of travels in Brazil by Hans Staden and Jean de Léry, who both journeyed there in the 1540s. Courtesy Bridgeman Art Library.