

ONE Thinking about Meat

During one of the first conversations we had with a New Zealand meat trader about the politically controversial sale of lamb and mutton flaps from his country and Australia to the Pacific Islands, he stopped to make sure we understood something very basic about his enterprise and the market: You do realize, he said, that no one grows a sheep for its flaps; the reason flaps don't bring a very good price is because they are too fatty for people who can afford better. But we will be able to sell them someplace when the price gets right. Meat never goes uneaten. It's that simple.

We had not thought about flaps in quite such succinct terms before, but we certainly understood what he was saying. In fact, we had become interested in flaps partly because they are usually avoided by white New Zealanders and Australians yet eagerly sought by many Pacific Islanders. For the former, flaps, which contain less than 50 percent lean meat, are

visibly too fatty to seem appealing or healthful. For the latter, flaps are too cheap and plentiful to be passed over. Indeed, the less affluent countries of the nearby Pacific Islands are a ready market for the export from New Zealand and Australia of large volumes of these low-value cuts (though 9–12 percent of a sheep's carcass by weight, flaps are only 3–5 percent of its value). Thus, while peripheral to the centrally located trader, flaps are central to our friends on the periphery. Of course, as the meat trader knows, however simple marketing principles of supply and demand may be, actually trading flaps, especially into the Pacific Islands, is rarely simple. Such trade involves more than grasping the global opportunity of turning one people's trash into another's treasure. Because, as we shall see, those who treasure flaps know that they are rejected as trash by those who provide them, this trade is, at the least, politically sensitive.¹ But such complexities temporarily aside, the meat traders do seem to be correct in a fundamental recognition: meat never goes uneaten. And this seems to have been the case for a very long time.

HUMANS AS MEAT EATERS

No one can be certain about the significance of meat eating to our earliest ancestors. Scholars speculate and infer based upon incomplete evidence in their attempts to reconstruct when, where, and why those who evolved into *Homo sapiens* began to eat meat with regularity. They also speculate and infer concerning the physiological and cultural effects of meat eating in human evolution. However, we are not anthropologists who specialize in reconstructing this evolution. All we can do is briefly convey what makes sense to us given what we have read.

In considering the role of meat in the lives of our ancestors, we think it important to avoid some of the assumptions about gender and human nature that are associated with the classic "man the hunter" argument. This argument has been rightly criticized as discounting the role of women and their gathering in human evolution. In fact, female gathering likely provided the calories that could be relied on for daily survival.² In addition, the argument has been rightly criticized as fostering

the stereotype of humans—men in particular—as fundamentally violent.³ In fact, male hunting likely provided important contexts for trust and social solidarity through cooperation and food sharing.

This being said, there is widespread—though not universal—agreement that our earliest ancestors ate meat whenever possible.⁴ They could, it seems, digest meat with relative ease. Initially, raw meat acquired through scavenging and opportunistic hunting was a nutritionally dense supplement to the raw roots and tubers available in the woodlands of Africa.⁵ As human evolution continued, meat remained an important component of the diet. And, at some point (perhaps as early as two million years ago⁶), our ancestors began to cook. While cooking enabled a wider range of plant foods (including those otherwise toxic) to be exploited, its greatest value was in helping our ancestors to extract more nutrients, more easily, from all of their foods—plant as well as animal.⁷ With increased nutrition, stature increased. In addition, with the availability of plant and animal foods that were easily chewed and readily digested, both tooth size and gut size decreased. Hence, the nutritional benefits of meat eating and cooking may have been important in the gradual (400,000-year) transition from the short-statured, large-toothed, big-gutted, small-brained members of the genus *Australopithecus* into the taller, smaller, slimmer, and larger variants of the genus *Homo*.⁸

The decrease in gut size was itself perhaps significant because it, in turn, may have facilitated an increase in brain size. Brains are expensive tissues to provision. Evidence of this comes from physical anthropologist William Leonard. He reports that a contemporary adult human (at rest) uses 20–25 percent of his or her energy needs to maintain brain metabolism, while nonhuman primates use 8–10 percent.⁹ Such facts have been interpreted by some to suggest that large human brains could not have been adequately sustained under early gathering and hunting circumstances without the reduction of another major metabolic system. There might, in other words, have been insufficient calories to support both a big brain and a big gut.¹⁰ Others are content to argue that a better diet resulting from an increase in meat eating (and eventually by cooking) was enough to foster the development of the human brain. Largely in support of the latter perspective, Leonard writes, “For early *Homo*, acquiring more

gray matter meant seeking out more of the energy-dense fare"—namely, animal foods.¹¹

At a certain point, increased brain size and the development of culture proved mutually reinforcing. Simply put, smarter people with more sophisticated ways of organizing, innovating, and interpreting their surroundings became more successful as they encountered one another and expanded through diverse environments. Culture, once elaborated, became *Homo*'s master adaptation. In its elaboration—in the development of ways of organizing, innovating, and interpreting—meat eating continued to have a role.¹² Cooking allowed nutrients to be better extracted from the relatively reliable vegetable food base (again, confirming the importance of woman in gathering) so that more time and energy could be spent over greater distances in hunting for nutritionally dense meats (which could, in addition, be preserved through smoking). Success in hunting, in turn, both relied on and further encouraged the development of the broadly adaptive strategies of cooperation and food sharing. Hence the increased emphasis on hunting that was facilitated by cooking may itself have contributed, at least in a small way, to the transition to a smarter and more culture-dependent *Homo*.

Significantly, as hunting techniques and technologies improved and as hominids spread out of Africa, large herbivores (including very large ones, such as mammoths) became prized game.¹³ In fact, Leonard believes that early humans may have spread widely out of Africa initially in pursuit of migrating animal herds.¹⁴ According to the geographer and environmental ecologist Vaclav Smil, such large herbivores would certainly have been more desirable than monkeys, hares, rabbits, and small deer—animals that might yield only two to three times the amount of energy expended in killing them. Large herbivores, with their larger body mass and (often) greater fat, might have more than twice the energy density of these smaller species.¹⁵ To be sure, they were big and often dangerous, but the payoff from a successful hunt would be great. According to Smil, if a group was lucky enough to kill a mammoth, its members would have access to between thirty and fifty times as much energy as the energy that had been expended in making the kill.¹⁶ On the other hand, physical anthropologists John Speth and Katherine

Spielmann argue that, at particular seasons, such large herbivores as bison and caribou may have been seriously fat-depleted and therefore less desirable energy sources than some smaller species. For instance, beaver and bear—and some fish—were likely to be relatively fat even in the later winter and early spring. Nonetheless, all agree that protein from meat sources was both necessary and valued.¹⁷ (We return to the significance of *fatty* animal protein a bit later.)

Some ten thousand years ago, however, such hunting and gathering subsistence strategies became less viable in certain areas of the world such as the Middle East, where agriculture became both feasible and necessary. Although agriculture did allow for larger population densities, it also led to a decline in the amount of meat—fatty or not—available for most people. Smil estimates that “average per capita meat intakes in traditional agricultural societies were rarely higher than 5–10 kg a year,” while preagricultural intakes were no less than 6–17 kg per year and, in many environments, 10–20 kg per year.¹⁸ Concerning peasant societies in the Old World, he writes that “meat was eaten no more frequently than once a week and relatively large amounts were consumed, as roasts and stews, only during festive occasions. . . . Consequently, animal foods provided generally less than 15 percent of all dietary protein, and saturated animal fats supplied just around 10 percent of all food energy in preindustrial populations.”¹⁹ In fact, until relatively recently in the Old World, meat was reserved mostly for ruling elites, wealthy urbanites, and marching armies; most people seldom ate meat.

Meat’s value thus derives from a complex of reasons. It is energy-dense and, when limited in availability, is often associated with wealth and privilege. It is, in addition, a food suggestive of existential and moral considerations. Because its acquisition involves the death of creatures that are clearly analogous to humans, it often carries with it considerations of life, death, and reproduction as well as those of reciprocity between species, spirits, and social groups.²⁰ For example, among the horticultural, though forest-dwelling, Kaluli of Papua New Guinea, men would hunt for weeks to amass the smoked meat necessary for the ceremonial exchanges that linked kin and neighbors throughout a particular region in relationships of positive reciprocity. At the same time,

Kaluli cosmology posits animals—especially wild pigs—and humans as linked in reciprocity. The world of one is the mirror of the other: humans in the Kaluli world appear as wild pigs to those in the other world, and vice versa. Hence Kaluli pig hunts result in the deaths of humans in the other world, and Kaluli deaths are often attributed to pig hunts by the mirrored others.²¹ A comparable cosmology is found among the horticultural Wari of the South American Amazon. There people become white-lipped peccaries when they die and are believed to offer themselves up to living kinsmen as game.²²

As a final example, and one closer to home, the anthropologist Nick Fiddes argues that it is precisely in the Old World—influenced as it eventually became by the Judeo-Christian tradition—that meat became an apt expression of God's relationship to man. According to the Bible, God gives man "dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth."²³ Under these circumstances, meat becomes, in Fiddes's phrase, a "natural symbol": one that is tangible and easy to understand and comes "naturally" to hand as a way to represent human control of the natural world. Indeed, he says, "Consuming the muscle flesh of other highly evolved animals is a potent statement of our supreme power."²⁴ Such power—the power to kill sentient animals for one's own benefit—can be not only gratifying in its assertion of human pre-eminence, but also discomfiting, as shown by efforts to distinguish the "animal from the edible"—for instance, in calling the living creature a *cow* and its flesh, *beef*.²⁵

Energy-dense, difficult to acquire, and socially and symbolically meaningful, meat does seem to be special. Even for those relatively few who actively refuse meat—who, for instance, strongly object to the assertion of human preeminence—it can be argued that meat remains salient if only as "that which must be rejected." And when people gain increased access to such a multifaceted good, they usually eat more of it. By the nineteenth century, especially in Western Europe and the United States, industrialization, urbanization, and greater agricultural productivity that allowed livestock to be fed grains began to provide such access. As Friedrich Engels noted in 1844 in *Condition of the Working-Class*

in England, "The better-paid workers, especially those in whose families every member is able to earn something, have good food as long as this state of things lasts; meat daily, and bacon and cheese for supper. Where wages are less, meat is used only two or three times a week, and the proportion of bread and potatoes increases. Descending gradually, we find the animal food reduced to a small piece of bacon cut up with the potatoes; lower still, even this disappears."²⁶

Meat consumption would continue to increase in Europe, although, as the statement from Engels suggests, the rich were likely to eat more of it than the poor. If one extrapolates from aggregate figures of carcass weight provided by Smil, it appears that the amount of meat eaten by the British tripled during the nineteenth century to a per capita consumption of 40 kg a year by 1900; the amount eaten by the French remained stable through the first half of the nineteenth century and then doubled over the next eighty years to more than 35 kg; and the amount consumed by Americans reached 51 kg by 1909.²⁷ In fact, as early as 1851 a working-class family in New York would buy annually about 66 kg of fresh meat per person (at about ten cents per pound). To be sure, these would be cheaper cuts for stewing and boiling, bones for soup stock, and an occasional roast or steak purchased for special occasions.²⁸

These trends in increased meat consumption have continued, and not just among those in the industrialized world. With increasingly globalized food systems, says Jeffery Sobal, "the dietary and nutritional transitions from plant-based high-fiber diets to animal- and vegetable-oil based, low-fiber, high-fat, high-protein diets" is spreading "to an increasing proportion of the world's population."²⁹ According to statistics collected by the Food and Agricultural Organization during 2000, those in affluent countries worldwide consumed a mean of 53 kg/year of meat, and in modernizing ones, 18 kg/year (although there is controversy over this figure because China seems to have inflated its statistics; see below).³⁰ Adam Drewnowski, an epidemiologist, supplies supplementary and more finely grained statistics, estimating that in Japan the per capita consumption of beef, veal, pork, and poultry rose from 2.2 kg in 1955 to 30 kg in 1994, while in China the consumption of these meats rose from 8 kg in 1970 to 35.8 in 1994.³¹

Indeed, for many poorer people meat has become the marker of modernity, a topic we explore in some detail later in this book. Thus the anthropologist Sarah Mahler found that among Central and South American migrants to the United States, increased access to meat is one of the few satisfactory aspects of their experience.³² Though the lives to which they aspire often remain out of reach—the nice cars they lean against in the pictures they send home are not theirs—they do feel affluent in terms of what they can eat. According to the historian Roger Horowitz, “When the relatively marginal gained more buying power, their meat consumption grew dramatically. . . . Meat is coveted and immigrants can be seen in the supermarket aisles pushing shopping carts laden heavily with packages of beef and chicken.”³³ Certainly the link between meat and modernity is clear to those enjoying the cheap and fatty lamb and mutton flaps in the Pacific Islands.

ON FATTY MEAT IN PARTICULAR

Human beings thus have long liked meat. But the trader with whom we began was not only saying that meat, by virtue of its universal appeal, will always find a market. He was also saying that some cuts of meat will find a market more readily than others. Even lamb and mutton flaps, deemed too fatty for some, will find a home if they are priced right. What do we make, then, of the fact that very fatty meats are likely to be of low value in terms of desirability and price?

Humans do tend to appreciate at least some fat on their meat. Large herbivores, as we have mentioned, were particularly sought after as food by stone-age hunters not only because they were large but also because they were fatty (though not as fatty as contemporary domesticated animals).³⁴ The anthropologist Marvin Harris goes so far as to suggest that much of the craving for meat is actually a craving for fatty meat. Fat is essential for the processing of the fat-soluble vitamins necessary for human health. Fat is also particularly useful because it is energy-dense and can be used readily to fuel the body. Unless there is such an energy source present in the diet, the amino acids in meat will be diverted, becoming fuel

rather than body-building proteins. Correspondingly, “hunters run the risk of starving to death if they rely too much on lean meat.”³⁵

Fat is also appreciated because many people find that fatty meats smell good when cooked. Though much of meat is composed of water, its aroma-carrying molecules are “hydrophobic” and can be dissolved in and conveyed by the fat alone. Therefore fat contributes significantly to the savory smell of cooking/cooked meat.³⁶ And if it is true, as some have suggested, that humans possess taste receptors for fat, then smell and taste would complement each other.³⁷ Indeed, it could be argued that fat became useful in human evolution for both its smell and its taste, which alert humans not just to high-energy foods, but also to protein-rich foods that could be used for their body-building amino acids.³⁸

Finally, fat is appreciated because it contributes to tenderness in three ways. According to Harold McGee in his magisterial *On Food and Cooking*, “Fat cells interrupt and weaken the sheet of connective tissue and the mass of muscle fibers; fat melts when heated rather than drying out and stiffening as the fibers do; and it lubricates the tissue, helping to separate fiber from fiber. Without much fat, otherwise tender meat becomes compacted, dry, and tough.”³⁹

Thus, as Horowitz shows in his study of meat in the U.S. diet, in the mid-1800s in New York City, roasts and steaks cut from the loin and rib were considered the most desirable, while “tougher cuts, such as the flank, rounds (both from the hind quarters), brisket, and plate (the latter two from the forequarters), generally served for stews, as longer cooking times in water soften them sufficiently. Bony meat, such as the neck, shoulder, and thigh, was ‘excellent for a sweet, strengthening soup.’ . . . Poor residents could even obtain beef shins, though they were ‘fit for nothing but soup.’”⁴⁰ Least desirable, however, were the fatty trimmings removed from more valuable cuts as well as the offal. Much of this leftover material, from both cows and pigs, was (and still is) combined with meat and other ingredients and disguised in sausages. Here, for example, are New York recipes popular at the turn of the twentieth century for frankfurters. One used seventy pounds of shoulder trimmings, twenty pounds of knuckle meat and about sixty pounds from the pig’s fat back to form a mixture about 40 percent fat—to which water, seasoning, and preserva-

tives were added. Another recipe called for about sixty-five pounds of cheek meat, fifteen pounds of tripe, twenty-five pounds of kidneys, and seventy-seven pounds of regular pork trimmings—which were mostly fat and rind. Corn meal, accounting for about 10 percent of the frankfurters' weight, was then added so as to "help conceal high fat content by retarding shrinkage during cooking."⁴¹

What constitutes *excessive* fat content is, of course, at least partly determined by context. This context is a product not only of what else one is eating but also of shifting standards of beauty, health, and well-being. As numerous sources have documented, what constitutes an appropriate level of visible fat in meats has changed for many in Western countries, including those white New Zealanders and Australians for whom lamb and mutton flaps are just too obviously fatty to be acceptable even as cheap meat.⁴² Yet, as many of us know, serious efforts to cut down on fat consumption may be difficult, especially when fat is concealed—tasted but not seen.⁴³ Indeed, there is some evidence that eating fat may become addictive—that fatty meat may not only be good to eat, but good to keep on eating.⁴⁴ And, to anticipate a bit, when fats are linked to sugars, as they increasingly are in fast foods, the combination may be both insidious and irresistible. Added to the human enjoyment of fats is an apparently innate human fondness for sugars. The results are the perfect, nutritionally dubious snacks which, as Sidney Mintz said, are both crisp and "finger-licking good."⁴⁵

MORE ON MOVING FATTY MEAT INTO FATTY BODIES

We now have a better and more detailed understanding of what the trader told us about the fundamental nature of his business: Because humans like meat, often with some measure of fat, meat never goes uneaten (and it may, in fact, be overeaten). Although there is likely to be a hierarchy among cuts of meat, traders will be able to sell virtually all of these cuts somewhere, if the price is right. And the mechanisms of the market work effectively to convey cuts that are more or less expensive by virtue of their desirability to those who can afford them. However, the trader

also recognized that there were special complexities (unfortunate ones, he thought) in the Pacific Island trade in lamb and mutton flaps, and it was, after all, these complexities that had brought us to him.

During the course of our research, we spoke to many white New Zealanders and Australians about our interest in flaps. Most had never eaten them. Some told us that they used to eat them when they were growing up in rural areas, but more frequently they had fed them to their dogs. Such a practice has remained common among sheep farmers; a recent article in *New Zealand Farmers Weekly* recommended that even if flaps are not available from sheep killed on the farm, they should still be acquired and fed to working dogs once or twice a week.⁴⁶ Others we talked to said that they ate flaps during their impoverished student days because they were cheap. But even for this minority, consumption of flaps was something they had left behind. Interestingly, the fact that flaps are no longer viewed as appropriate fare stimulated one New Zealand man's efforts to redeem them. He was prompted by the recollection that "when he was a kid, his father would buy and butcher half a lamb at a time so that he could get cheap meat and tasty lamb flaps featured regularly." In his article "Barbecue Lamb Belly the Slow Way" (interestingly subtitled "Or How I Wasted My Saturday Afternoon"), he describes how, after trimming the flaps and giving the scraps to his cat, he grilled them for four hours with the idea that "if lamb flap is slow-cooked, most of the fat will render out." Along the way he mentions that flaps are "as good as currency in New Guinea."⁴⁷

We should mention as well that some seek out fatty meats precisely because they are not generally seen as appropriate fare. The *New York Times* writer Frank Bruni describes some upscale New York restaurants as catering to such transgressive eating. Bruni believes that "decades of proliferating sushi and shrinking plates, of clean California cuisine and exhortations to graze, have fostered a robust (or is that rotund?) counterculture of chefs and diners eager to cut against the nutritional grain and straight into the bellies of beasts. In fact, bellies (most often pork, more recently lamb) are this counterculture's LSD."⁴⁸ Said one restaurant patron, eating such food "puts you in touch with your barbaric self."

However, transgressors aside, the fact that most white New Zealanders and Australians (not to mention Americans) do not desire lamb and mutton flaps and Papua New Guineans and other Pacific Islanders do reflects more than a distribution of preferences and incomes. It seems to reflect a real dichotomy between those who produce but eschew the product and those who import and enjoy it: between those for whom flaps are not good enough and those for whom flaps are just fine. And this dichotomy suggests not only differences in who can afford to buy what, but also in who is better than whom. Thus the trade in flaps, at least in the Pacific Islands, is not a simple matter of supply and demand. Rather, it is a complex and political matter filled with connotations about comparability and worth. Moreover, because this is a trade in fatty flesh, the complexities often become embodied in fatty Pacific Island flesh in a manner that compels attention and demands response.

As we have suggested, the prevalence of eating-related lifestyle—also known as “non-communicable”—diseases among many Pacific Islanders is alarming.⁴⁹ In Tonga, the obesity prevalence among those aged fifteen and above is more than 60 percent; 29 percent of Tongans die of cardiovascular diseases, the leading causes of death for them. The rate of diabetes is also very high; at about 15 percent of the population (having doubled in prevalence from 7.5 percent in 1973 to 15.1 percent in 2002), Tonga’s prevalence of diabetes and impaired glucose tolerance is among the highest in the world.⁵⁰

Although a genetic component is likely in such high rates of lifestyle diseases,⁵¹ it is also clear that some Tongans are eating too much and not very well. As one dramatic illustration, a Japanese journalist described the usual pre-diet daily fare of an affluent Tongan woman, 5 feet 8 inches tall, who at one point weighed 290 pounds before a successful effort at weight reduction.⁵²

Breakfast: 6 fried eggs, 5 pieces of bread, 110g of butter, plenty of jam or preserves, plenty of sugar, and any leftovers from the previous night.

Lunch: 1 kg. of *sipi* [the local term for flaps], 8 ripe bananas, 1 kg. of root crops.

Dinner: Same as lunch.

Snacks: 1 liter of ice-cream, or 6 pancakes, or half a cake.

This woman did decide to cut back, but what should be done, not only for her but for Tongans more generally? A study carried out by the South Pacific Consumer Protection Programme, requested by Tonga's National Food and Nutrition Committee as part of its efforts to confront the country's lifestyle diseases, recognized that "Consumers do have a choice. Everyday we choose what food we prepare for our family. If we choose to prepare a regular diet of fatty foods (like mutton flaps), our families' health will be at risk; if we choose a diet of fresh local food our family will be healthier. The problem is that Pacific Island peoples have a limited choice in the market place because we have limited cash to buy food and because traders persist in importing, and offering for sale, poor quality cuts of meat like mutton flaps."⁵³ In other words, though choice is important, it is also shaped and constrained. As the report concluded, the presence of flaps in the Pacific Islands is controversial—and "the answer [about what to do concerning them] is not that simple."

SOME MEATY IDEAS

Because the answer is not simple—because flaps are fatty meat, desired by some, though not by those who produce and purvey them, and because they become part of fatty bodies—they are a commodity worth anthropological attention. They have effects and are understood by differently located people to have effects in a regional (if not world) system. This is a system in which First World nations are complexly and often ambiguously linked to Third World nations. Certainly, throughout the region, these differently located people pay considerable attention to where flaps come from, where they go, and with what apparent consequences in wealth and in health. Flaps, thus observed, become caught up in the ways in which these people identify themselves and others. The fact that some eat flaps and others avoid them is recognized not just as a reflection of personal preference (as, perhaps, with eating or

avoiding broccoli) but as a mark of group membership. Simply put, flap eaters are seen as distinguished in important ways from flap refusers. In this regard, flaps operate much as do “totems.”

As anthropologists use the term, *totems* are potent objects, often animals or plants, that serve to define groups and identities—both in and of themselves and in contrast to those of others. For a hypothetical example, those who share the totem of the bear become united with each other as members of the bear clan. As bear-clan members, they are also differentiated from wolf-clan members—and from fox-clan and beaver-clan members. Moreover, as part of this unification and differentiation, members of a totemic group are often thought to share a fundamental nature with their totem: they are thought to possess some of the qualities of bears, wolves, foxes, or beavers. This relationship of intimacy between clan members and their totem is frequently reflected in dietary practices that prohibit clan members from killing and eating their particular totem, though they may kill and eat those of other clans.

In such totemic arrangements, each distinct group (whether bear, wolf, fox, or beaver clan) is constituted in the same sort of way. Clan members have similar relationships to one another as well as to their respective totems, and the totems themselves are similar to one another in important regards. In our example, they are all similar as furry mammals. And as various species of furry mammals, they are all similar in their differences—all are comparable variations on a common theme. In this way, the differences between the assorted totems and the clans balance out: all stand side by side; none is presumed better than any other.

However, while flaps do define groups in totemic-like ways (with those who eat flaps united and distinguished from those who refuse to eat flaps), the flap-focused groups exist in a context not of equality but of hierarchy. This is a context in which the eaters tend to be people of the Third World, and the refusers tend to be people of the First World. The meaning of totemic eating or not eating shifts under such circumstances: being unable to eat bear meat because one is a member of the bear clan is not the same as refusing to eat flaps because the meat is not good enough for one to eat. The differences between the eaters and the refusers do not balance out, and they come to rankle. Many of the flap

eaters know that they are eating what others reject because they have decidedly less efficacy in the world. In fact, they fear that they are often seen by the flap refusers as being in a different and lesser league.

The rhetoric of the market might seem to dispel this fear. Thus, many meat traders (and others in New Zealand and Australia to whom we spoke) explain the primary difference between flap eaters and flap refusers not in terms of categorical difference, but as a function of relative wealth and thus of market position. They argue that in a marketplace where all sorts of goods jostle for attention and acceptance, some consumers will choose the lower-priced cuts; others, the legs, loins, and Frenched racks. But flaps are, we think, not just governed by supply and demand as these play out in relative prices and strategic choices. After all, many people in the First World can choose to reject flaps resoundingly—as not good enough for them—regardless of their financial resources and regardless of the price. Those in the Third World who cannot easily choose to reject them thereby incorporate food that others regard as intrinsically inferior, as no good at all (except for a dog).

When such a compromised commodity comes to index a whole group of people, it marks not only relative wealth and market position, but also social and economic class. That people in the Third World eat such a product resonates with their other life circumstances and prospects. For instance, many who eat flaps may, in complex ways, be more vulnerable to serious lifestyle diseases, and their vulnerability may be compounded by limited educational and employment opportunities.⁵⁴ The difference, thus, between flap eaters and refusers is not just a matter of degree—relative wealth and market position—reflected in choice of commodities. It is a matter of kind, of how a whole category of people is significantly constrained. In this regard flaps are not just another commodity circulating in the market: as cheap fatty meat deemed second-rate, flaps resist what Karl Marx called the “fetishization” of commodities.

Viewing the value of commodities simply as the price they can bring on the market—as the result of supply and demand—is, Marx argued, to fetishize them. It is to ascribe to them an autonomy—a life—of their own. It is to convey that an object has an inherent value to which people are subjectively drawn. The problem with this—with, for instance, be-

coming mesmerized with the diamond engagement rings in a jeweler's display case—is that it draws attention away from the labor that brings commodities into existence and which, Marx believed, is the real source of their value.⁵⁵ To ignore this labor value is to ignore the life circumstances of those who labor, which are often of enduring inequality. Such would be the case with diamond miners, traders, and cutters—not to mention the likes of factory workers—who, through various types of coercion (if only that most must sell their labor to survive), have their labor appropriated as “surplus value.” This is to say, their labor is turned into a commodity for sale on the market for the profit of others. Yet it seems to us that flaps are commodities that resist such fetishization. As a cheap, fatty, undesirable cut of meat, the material nature of flaps gives some people pause: in so doing, flaps evoke the labor processes of killing and dismembering that went into them.

Flaps resist fetishization in another way, one revealed by analysis, not of what it takes to produce a commodity, but of what it takes to consume it.⁵⁶ Some analysts emphasize the efforts of advertisers to convince consumers that particular commodities are especially attractive. Others emphasize the efforts of consumers to seek out those special commodities that can best reflect and enhance their positions in the world.⁵⁷ Regardless of emphasis, all of these consumption-oriented analysts agree that once commodities become desirable, they get caught up in the construction and enhancement of identities. (For example, your car, whether a Chevy, BMW, or Prius, comes to reflect who you are, or may want to be.) Moreover, once some commodities become fetishized as better than others, they may pass on their value, their potency, to those who possess them—who themselves become fetishized as more compelling. The reverse is also true as fetishized people pass on their potency to the things they own. The lives and possessions of these compelling people become the focus of emulation through consumption: others want to be like them and therefore buy what they think such people possess. Yet, it seems to us that flaps are commodities that resist this fetishization, too. As a cheap, fatty, stigmatized cut of meat, the social distribution of flaps gives some people pause: in so doing, flaps evoke the numerous and persisting inequalities between eaters and refusers.

In effect, because lamb and mutton flaps catch people up in strongly felt likes, dislikes, or ambivalences, many of them begin to recognize—and to scrutinize—the often fraught regional relationships that move flaps from one place and group to another.⁵⁸ Flaps encourage people to think critically about the broader historical relationships that make them, for instance, into Third World eaters or First World eschewers. Thus, by following the flow of this fatty flesh from First World pastures and pens in New Zealand and Australia to the Third World's plates and pots in various Pacific Island countries, we can learn much not only about how certain societies and economies are linked but also about how people understand and experience who they are—and who they might become.

But before we can continue this flap-focused exploration of global processes as they play out in this region, we must first explain how flaps came to be: how, as one meat trader put it, they became “liberated” from sheep carcasses for sale on the market.