

Michael Bruckert. La Chair, les hommes et les dieux

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► **To cite this version:**

Estelle Fourat, Michael La. Michael Bruckert. La Chair, les hommes et les dieux: Recension. South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal, Association pour la recherche sur l'Asie du Sud, 2019. ird-03413218

HAL Id: ird-03413218

<https://hal.ird.fr/ird-03413218>

Submitted on 3 Nov 2021

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south
asia
multidisciplinary
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journal

South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal Book Reviews

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/samaj/4903>

ISSN: 1960-6060

Publisher

Association pour la recherche sur l'Asie du Sud (ARAS)

Electronic reference

Estelle Fourat, « Michael Bruckert. *La Chair, les hommes et les dieux* », *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* [Online], Book Reviews, Online since 30 January 2019, connection on 30 January 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/samaj/4903>

This text was automatically generated on 30 January 2019.



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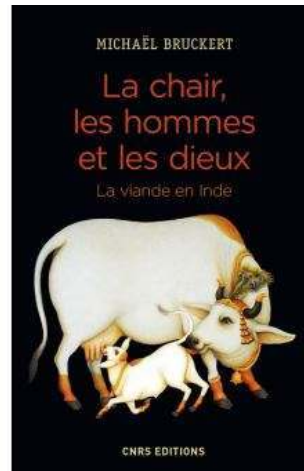
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Estelle Fourat

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- 1 Michael Bruckert's book *La Chair, les hommes et les dieux* is based on the author's dissertation in Human Geography, which received the Innovation Award from the French *Société de Géographie*.
- 2 The author assesses the significance and status of meat in India within the framework of the more general issue regarding the global shift towards a meat-based diet. The latter is problematic from moral and ecological standpoints, but the phenomenon does not seem to have gained a foothold in India since meat consumption is still very marginal (the mean meat consumption rate being 3 kg per-capita in 2009–2010). The author seeks to understand the reasons underlying this distinct Indian hallmark in a setting of urbanization and socioeconomic change. While considering food to be a "spatial fact" (Bruckert 2017:15), he looks at food flow patterns as a starting point in his interpretation, while carefully describing the material and spatial organization of practices, along with the discourse and representations linked with these foods. Tamil Nadu—mainly encompassing the cities of Chennai and Kamachipuram in Theni District—is the geographical setting of the study.
- 3 Readers are guided along the pathway of meat products from their places of consumption—in or away from home—and invited to consider livestock rearing and slaughter practices, and finally supply and distribution systems. The argument put forward in this book is that territorialized and spatialized vegetarianism and meat-eating prevails in India and is mainstreamed through a relational network that is perceptible throughout the sector. For that purpose, the author casts aside hypermaterialistic views for which apparent idealistic justifications shroud real economic or ecological concerns, as well as hyperculturalistic views that prioritize idealistic rationales. Instead he strives to highlight the relationships between the physical dimensions of a food space (via the flow and spatial distribution of meat in production and sales locations), its material dimensions (via meat slaughter and processing procedures and techniques), and its symbolic and social dimensions (via the description of a system of representations). The whole demonstration is based on the idea that a sociospatial gradient of proximity and remoteness relative to "ritual purity" determines the extent of the purity of individuals, animals and food, which is crucial with respect to food production and consumption patterns. The argument is structured in three parts in this work.
- 4 The first part is entitled "Eating meat," based on the assumption that this habit has evolved from a marginal to a more mainstream status because of the increased prevalence of new meat uses and meanings, as highlighted by an analysis of meat consumption practices, or as the author calls them "carnivory." Meat consumption patterns vary between regions in the national space for political, religious and ethnic reasons, but a vegetarian ideology has nevertheless led to the marginalization of meat commodities and their absence in the public space, as reflected by the fact that the *Masterchef* TV program was entirely devoted to vegetarian cookery in 2014. This domination of vegetarianism derives from an "Indian ethos" which structures the relationship with meat. The latter is hierarchically ranked, with fish and eggs at the top



of the pyramid, followed by sacrificial mutton and chicken meat. Yet there is a taboo on consuming pork (the meat of an omnivorous animal) and beef (derived from buffalo or cows, which are sacred in India for Hindus). Schematically, the hierarchy of meat or meatless diets mirrors the social hierarchy, with meat being spurned by Brahmans but revered by Dalits. In everyday life, however, the status of food products may shift according to the social and religious context, with the Indian ethos disseminating both horizontally so as to be in favor among other religious groups and vertically at the caste scale via a “Hinduization of practices.” The social proximity or distance is sustained through linguistic terms that highlight the values attributed to meat: “warming” or “invigorating,” inspired by the presence or resurgence of traditional medicine; or “fat,” “lean” or “high protein,” according to the contemporary nutritional discourse. As indicated by the high chicken consumption rate, meat-eating is becoming commonplace, i.e. consumed in a way which, according to the author’s categorization (p. 95), is neither sacrificial nor ceremonial. The status of chicken is the most striking example because the slaughter of this animal is not under any religious regulation, its mode of production—according to the author—transforms the meat into a “pure” food, its taste is relatively “neutral,” and it is acceptable from a dietary standpoint while remaining economically accessible. The spatial dimension of meat consumption is identified by a purity gradient ranging—in concentric circles—from the interior to the exterior of the household, starting from the cooking area. This gradient results in the exclusion of household meats while placing an “impure” label on foods cooked outside of the circle. This gradient has stalled out-of-home consumption, but the public sphere has nevertheless become a new space for individual expression, while the taste for meat-eating is socially expressed mainly in restaurants. According to the author, the domestic space corresponds to a caste-enforced commensality, while conviviality associated with the self-selected social group prevails in the public space. “Spatialized vegetarianism” is marked by a ritual or traditional culture and meat-eating by a cosmopolitan culture. But this opposition puts aside groups of Indians who ate meat traditionally. In the urban space there is a proliferation rather than convergence of meat statuses—beef is valued or shunned. The author concludes that meat is a food commodity which is discredited by new moral and ethical regulations associated, for instance, with the current heightened awareness of ecological and animal wellbeing issues.

- 5 The second part is entitled “Producing meat”; here the author describes what he calls the “fate of meat” from animals, and defines the livestock rearing and meat processing conditions required to generate food products. Livestock rearing conditions vary depending on the animals. Buffaloes are raised mainly to produce milk and they are also used for animal traction in agricultural activities, while cows are sacred and thus excluded from any form of exploitation. Beef is therefore a cattle-rearing and dairy economy by-product. Small ruminants, on the other hand, are reared for their meat. In Tamil Nadu, micro-farms where smallholders raise goats prevail alongside large herds belonging to herder castes. The fate of chicken meat is dictated by the streamlining and intensification of the poultry sector. This fate has impacts on animal movement patterns. Local demand for small ruminant and chicken meat has led to shorter supply chains and flow times. Meanwhile, as beef slaughtering and consumption is banned in some states, flows of this commodity have been extended throughout India and even abroad as export increased. The purity ideology also percolates through the sociotechnical system since the logistics of animal flows through slaughterhouses to sales outlets separates animals from each other (small and large ruminants), while keeping meat out of Indian

consumers' sight, i.e. the slaughterhouses and sales outlets present are concealed. Mutton-sales outlets are separate from beef-sales outlets, and beef is sold only in two markets in Chennai. The author highlights the fact that livestock-killing and carcass-trimming techniques are kept out of view in India. These techniques are implemented to obtain tasty meat: the skin (considered inedible) is removed, the meat is cut into cubes and its freshness is preferred over its maturation (meat is consumed immediately), while cold storage is thought to reduce the taste quality. These practices and sales outlets derive from a traditional system in which meat has a sacrificial status, as opposed to production and sales practices which give it a food commodity status. In the rich districts of big cities, different kinds of meat are no longer kept separate in small shops, whereas meat products are sold in just one supermarket (Fish and Fresh) in Chennai. Meanwhile, in an emerging agrifood industry, chicken and pork are processed in nugget-form, thus concealing the meat. Beef is sold raw, supposedly because it complies with the traditional system described above. The different activities devoted to the fate of meat thus tend to make meat consumption more acceptable and give it new statuses.

- 6 The third and last part is entitled "Negotiating the role and status of meat"; here the author highlights interactions between the stakeholders involved in the fate of meat of animals in both the public and political space, and he concludes by presenting models of meat-flow pathways in the social space. He presents detailed maps displaying animal slaughter and meat trimming, sale and consumption sites, and highlights the territorial separation between meat-eating and vegetarian spaces. The urban space where individuals live and move around is structured by a spatial gradient of purity linked to the presence of Hindu temples. Meat flow patterns are, for instance, described in a Muslim neighborhood where meat is important, and conversely in areas inhabited by Brahmans or middle-ranking castes where meat segregation reigns. The quest for new meat outlets involves upscale butcheries and major restaurants, but the meat hierarchy (chicken, mutton and beef) nevertheless still prevails. The presence of meat in the public space is the result of the interaction between proximity (located close to barges) and remoteness (via visual and olfactory concealment). Locations and the social space are marked by the presence of meat—the impurity label leads to the marginalization of slaughterhouses, meat-selling shops and, reciprocally, the meat and animals reared for their meat acquire various meanings according to the many spaces through which they pass. The author conceptualizes this meat flow through three models of configurations he calls "meat flows in the social space," with the latter being driven by urbanization and industrialization (p. 331–33): vernacular in the sense of produced in the domestic sphere (rooster and goat), artisanal (small ruminants, chicken) and mass production (chicken meat).
- 7 The author's major contribution is that he showcases what is taboo in India, i.e. the sociotechnical system of knowledge and procedures involved in meat production and distribution—encapsulated in what he calls "meat flows"—with each animal being integrated in a network of stakeholders and processing conditions. The real and/or ideal distance is the main variable in this geographical approach to studying the status of meat in India, relationships between individuals, with animals (through livestock rearing and slaughter) and with the gods (reconciliation and distancing via rituals or the presence of a temple). Relationships with different meats are determined by a rationale of visibility/invisibility in the social space and "spatialized vegetarianism" may be understood as being a means for certain social groups to ensure territorial control. Despite the efforts of

the author made to link the physical, material and social dimensions of a food space, I nevertheless find that there is an unfortunate lack: a comparison with other animal relationship systems based on the prolific anthropological literature that has been published on human-animal relationships and animal-foods consumption (Haudricourt 1962; Digard 1988; Descola 2005; Poulain 2007)—and which provides fertile ground for unearthing clues—in order to steer the argument away from the Indian ethos and conceptualize the system of relations is not carried out. Conversely, some cultural features such as metempsychosis are not considered in the system of representations that shape the relationship with animals and meat, despite the fact that this principle partially explains the proximity between humans and animals and the taboo regarding animal slaughter and meat consumption in this cultural area. Finally, the process of legitimizing the slaughter and the animal-to-food status transformation are only very briefly addressed, which sometimes makes it hard to position animals on the proximity/remoteness gradient: are cows too close to humans to be consumed while and chickens are far enough away?¹

- 8 As my dissertation was also focused on a similar topic in India, i.e. food consumers and their patterns of eating animal-based foods, including eggs and dairy products, I welcomed the author's careful attention to integrating meat consumption in a sociotechnical system—an initiative which to my knowledge has never been undertaken in India. This book provides a new spatial framework for the interpretation of food issues and should foster interdisciplinary dialogue.

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NOTES

1. See an analysis in Fourat (2018).

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