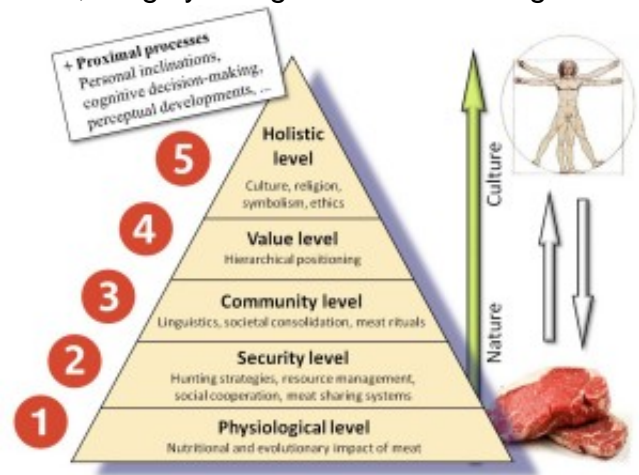


Meat traditions (and the co-evolution of humans and meat)

If food is indeed “good to think”, as in Lévi-Strauss’ famous maxim, then meat seems to be the supreme example. Meat is truly about *us*. Besides, the way we deal with meat needs urgent reconsideration due to the many alarming environmental, economical, ethical, and health issues that are potentially connected to its consumption. It is however crucial not to overlook the historical dimensions of what we have labelled here as “meat traditions”. These traditions relate to the wide diversity of hunting, slaughtering, eating, and meat sharing activities, as well as the many rituals that accompany them. Humans and meat have co-evolved: eating meat has always been a tremendously important biosocial activity, affecting body and psyche. We suggest that in addition to personal inclinations and recent societal effects, several long-term effects on the human desire for meat are to be discerned. In our study, Maslow’s pyramid of human needs was used as a basis to chart and analyze these effects. Five levels were identified, roughly along a nature-culture gradient:



The **physiological level** implies that meat eating was of Darwinian importance for the evolution of our species, acting as a highly nutritious substrate and enabling brain expansion to meet novel cognitive and intellectual challenges. Whether or not this has left traces of an inherent “meat craving” is yet to be established. Some very preliminary lines of research even venture into hypotheses about a link between meat consumption and brain health.

The **security level** sketches how the collective hunting for meat was developed as a survival strategy to meet the physiological needs mentioned above. As such, it gave rise to complex and intense social behaviour and networking, gender differentiation, and - possibly - altruism and proto-economic behaviour. It still needs to be verified if this has had lasting effects on the (often) different attitudes of males and females towards meat, especially in the West, or if the latter is a merely a recent cultural construct.

The **community level** builds on the previous level and underlines the historical importance of meat traditions for the creation of societal bonds of all sorts. Since the Palaeolithic era up

till present, meat eating and its associated rituals have a central place in ceremonies and festivities worldwide.

At the **value level**, a description is given of the role of meat traditions in the consolidation of social hierarchies. The division of the pieces of choice among elites has been a recurring phenomenon. As a result, the access to meat has played an important symbolic role in class struggle. The question is how meat still shapes current power relationships on both micro- (for instance within families) and macro-level (for instance between the West, emerging economies, and developing countries).

The **holistic level** is arguably the most complex one. It relates to the many context-dependent cultural and symbolic aspects of meat traditions. In the West, for instance, meat still has strong connotations of masculinity and vitality but can also lead to disgust under certain conditions. It also needs to be investigated to which degree meat traditions are still primary to religion and culture, in particular with respect to rituals and taboos.

Meat, both a physical and conceptual resource, relates to fundamental human characteristics. Any policy that aims at changing our meat production and consumption patterns will have to take into account its many deep-rooted effects. Surely, meat traditions will keep on affecting the global demand for meat in the next decennia and clash to a certain degree with short-term needs for change. The possible interactions with religion, gender, cultural identity, communal structures, purchase power, and many other factors will have definitely to be taken into account.

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