

The politics of sight

Nature, vegetarianism and the rise of compassion for non-human animals in the city

Dr John Lever

Members Day, Vegetarian Society
11 October 2025, Manchester





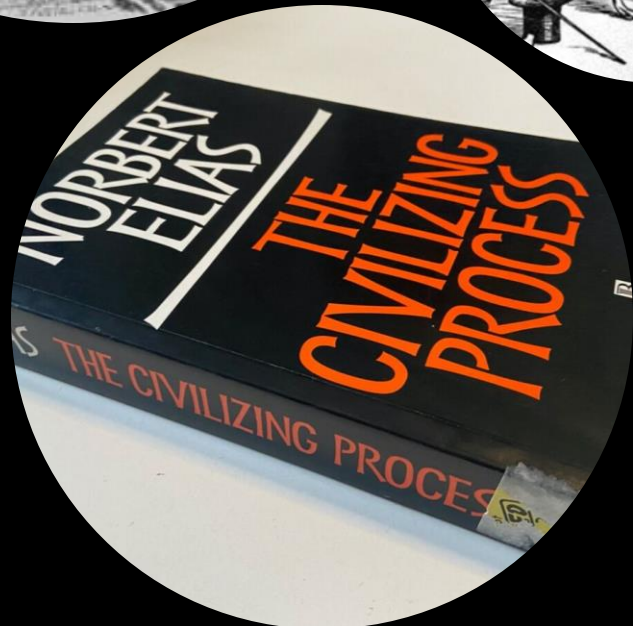
Every Twelve Seconds

Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight

"Pachirat's extraordinary narrative tells us about much more than abused animals and degraded workers. It opens our eyes to the kind of society in which we live."—Peter Singer, author of *Animal Liberation*

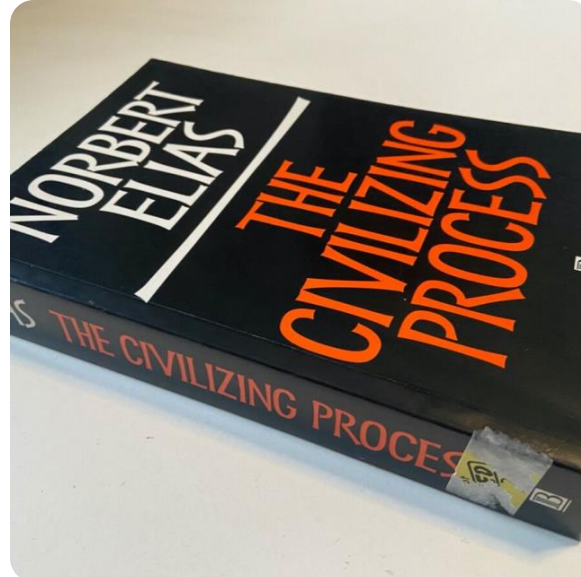
TIMOTHY PACHIRAT

The *politics of sight* is the idea that making objectionable practices visible will motivate people to stop acquiescing to them, or at the very least own up to the fact that they exist!



In his work *On the process of civilization*, the sociologist Norbert Elias (2012[1939]) outlines how acts once performed in public without the slightest sense or shame or embarrassment slowly came to demand (over the course of several centuries) more discretion.





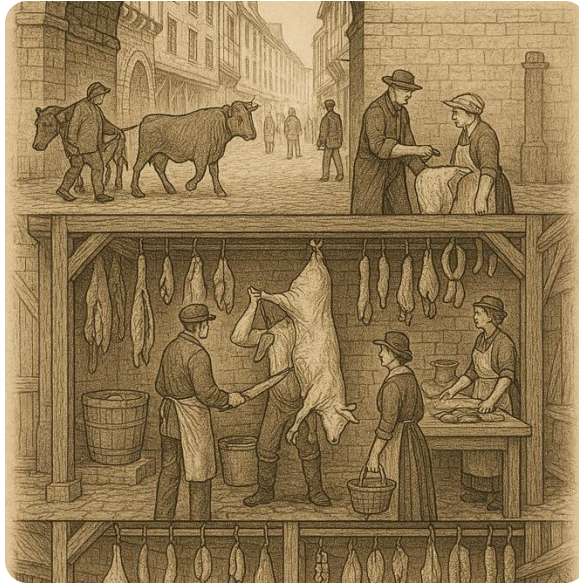
‘It will be seen again and again how a characteristic of the whole process that we call civilisation is this movement of segregation, this hiding ‘behind the scenes’ of what has become distasteful’ (Elias, 2012).



‘One ought not to snort or smack one’s lips while eating. One ought not to spit across the table or blow one’s nose on the tablecloth (for this is used for wiping greasy fingers) or [spit] into the fingers (with which one held the common dish)’ (Elias 2012, 109).



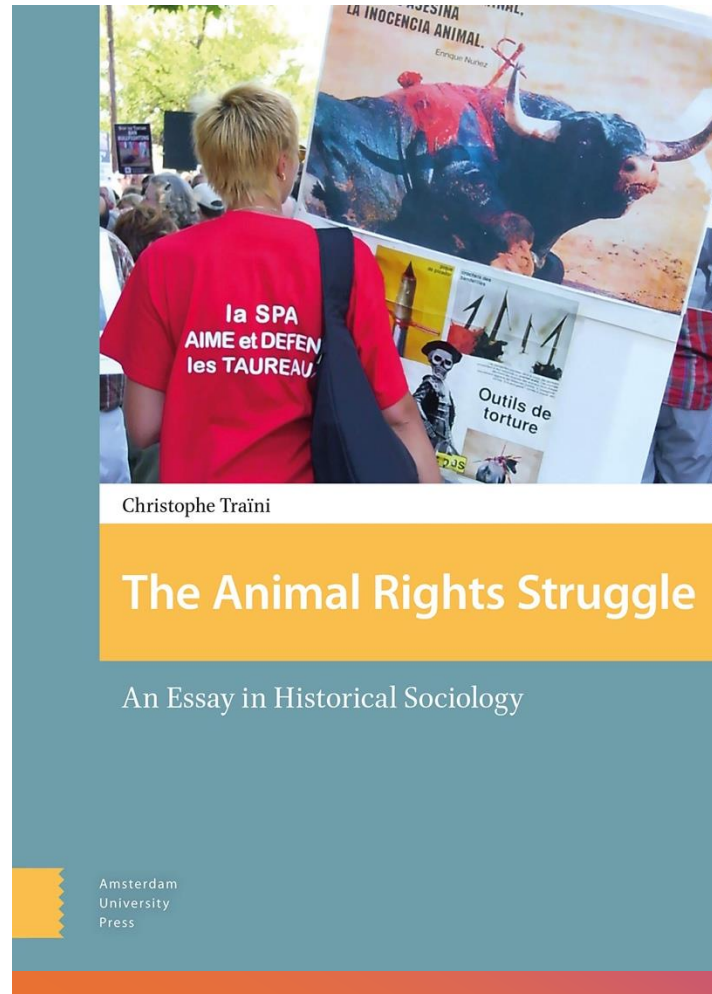


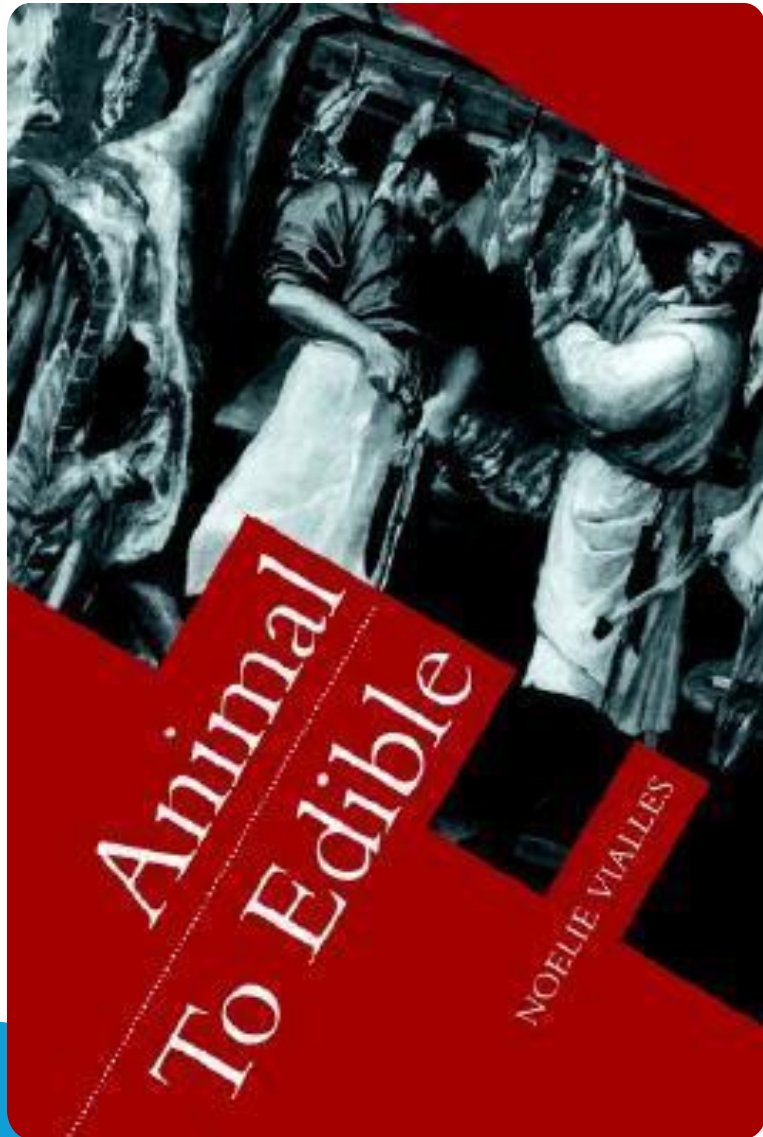


The Shambles...

- The term 'Shambles' comes from the medieval period and refers to a meat market, or an open-air slaughterhouse where butchers would kill animals and sell their meat.
- Shambles Square in Manchester was once a hub for butchers, and the shambles in York was once known as 'The Great Flesh Shambles.'
- In Poland there is a monument in honour of the high numbers of animals slaughtered in these places...

- Across the Western world, livestock were an everyday sight on city streets well into the 18th century and animal slaughter in public spaces was still commonplace (Lever 2019).
- ‘Butchers would slaughter animals near their market stall, behind their shop, or even in a nearby street, leaving animal blood and guts on the ground in full view of passers-by’ (Triani, 2016)





- It's been widely argued that the emergence of large slaughterhouses in the 19th century was linked to shifting attitudes towards meat production that accompanied the growth of large cities and urban populations...
- As the anthropologist Noëlie Vialles (1994) observes, the visibility of slaughter in public spaces was so disturbing that means had to be found to put it out of sight and mind....

- In England, the realities of meat production were quarantined in line with the growth of centralised state authorities.
- What was once personal slowly became industrial.
- Over time the trend was toward fewer but larger slaughterhouses driven by public health reforms and by technologies like rail transport and refrigeration (MacLachlan, 2007).

Slaughter-houses in nineteenth-century London

247

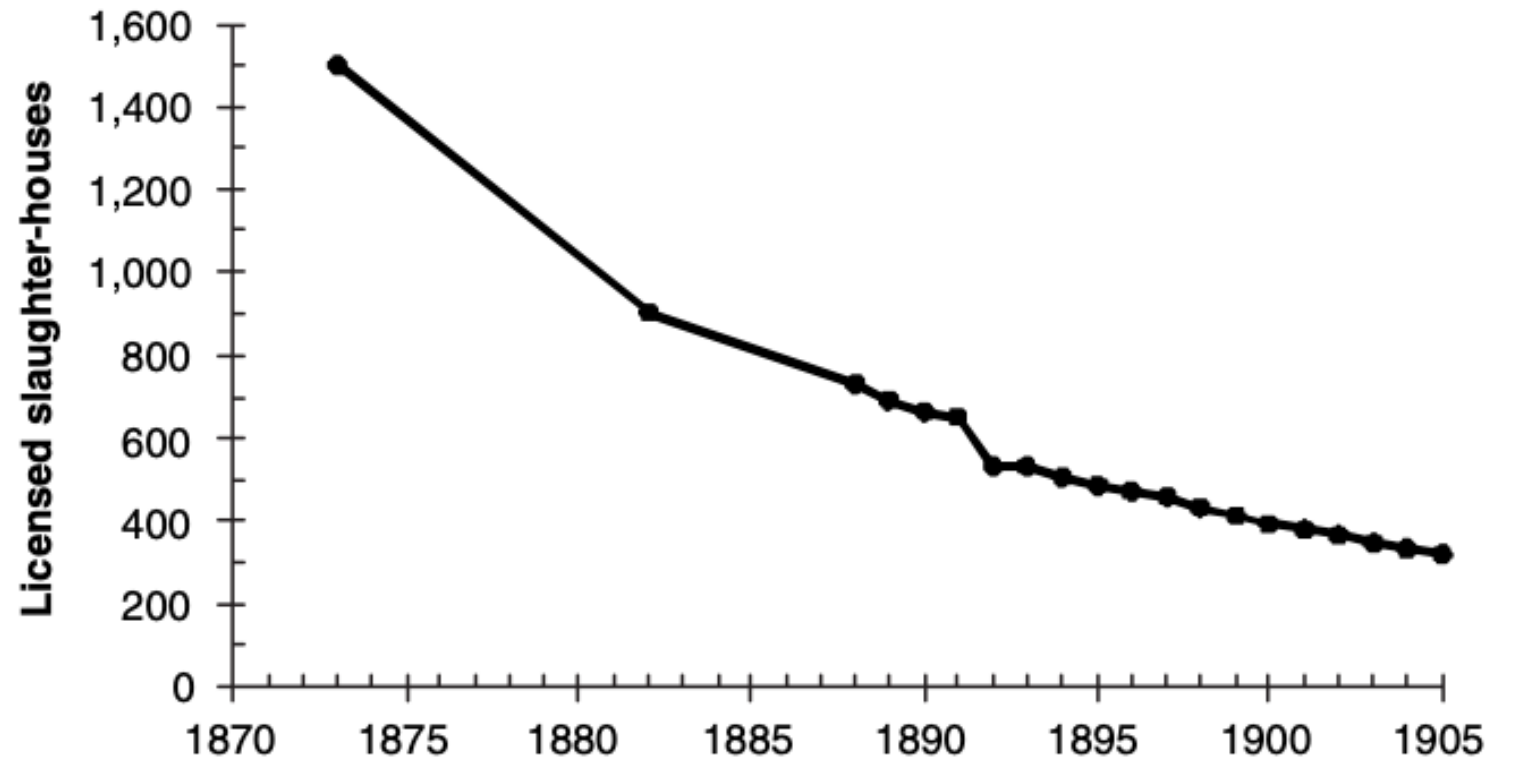


Figure 1: Licensed slaughter-houses in metropolitan London
Source: LCC Sanitary and Special Purposes Committee, report, *London County Council Minutes of Proceedings* (various years).



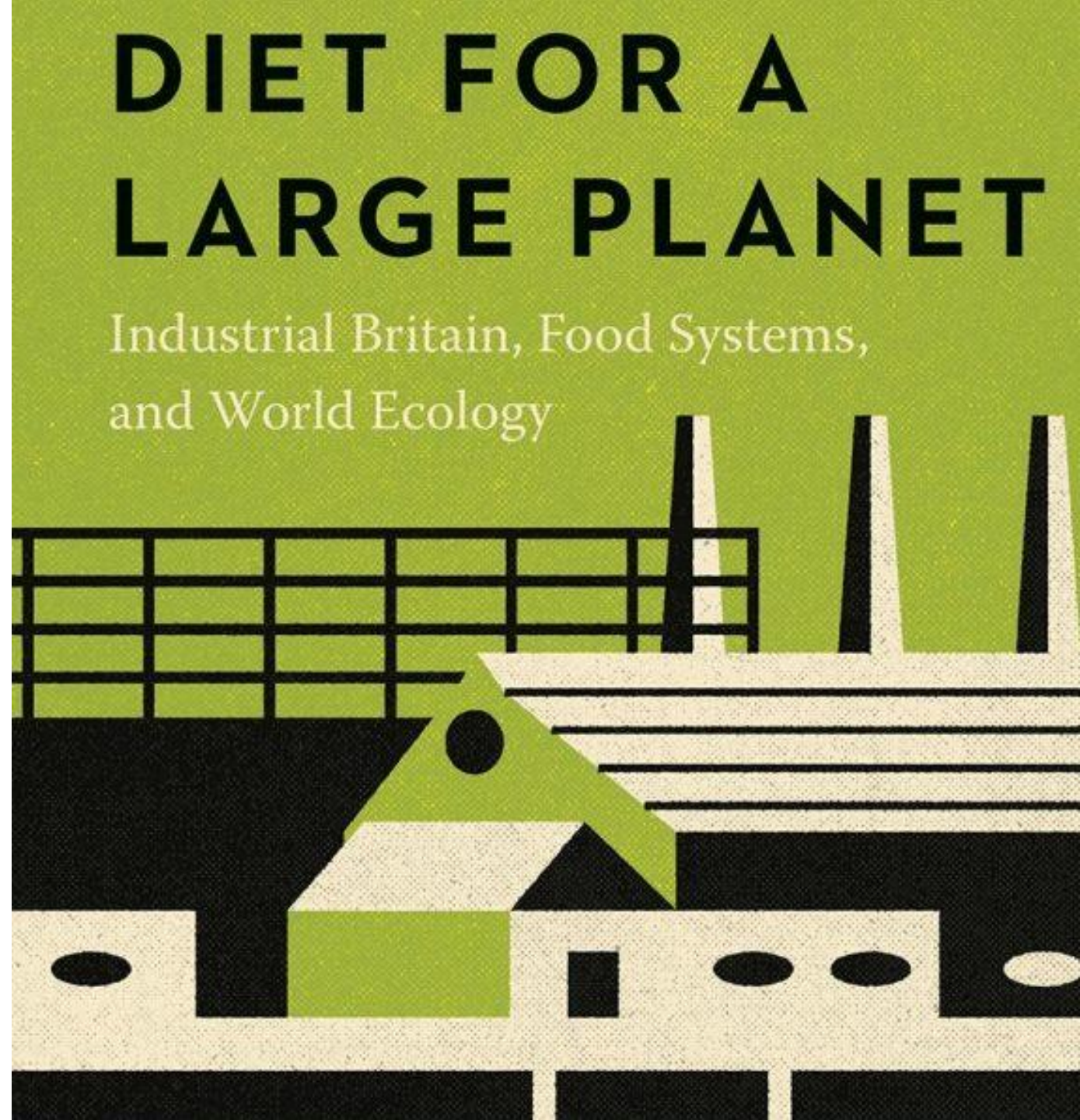
Ill. 2: While it could be typical of any market morning in the first half of the nineteenth century, this scene actually represents Smithfield Market's last day of operation before it was relocated to Islington in June 1855.

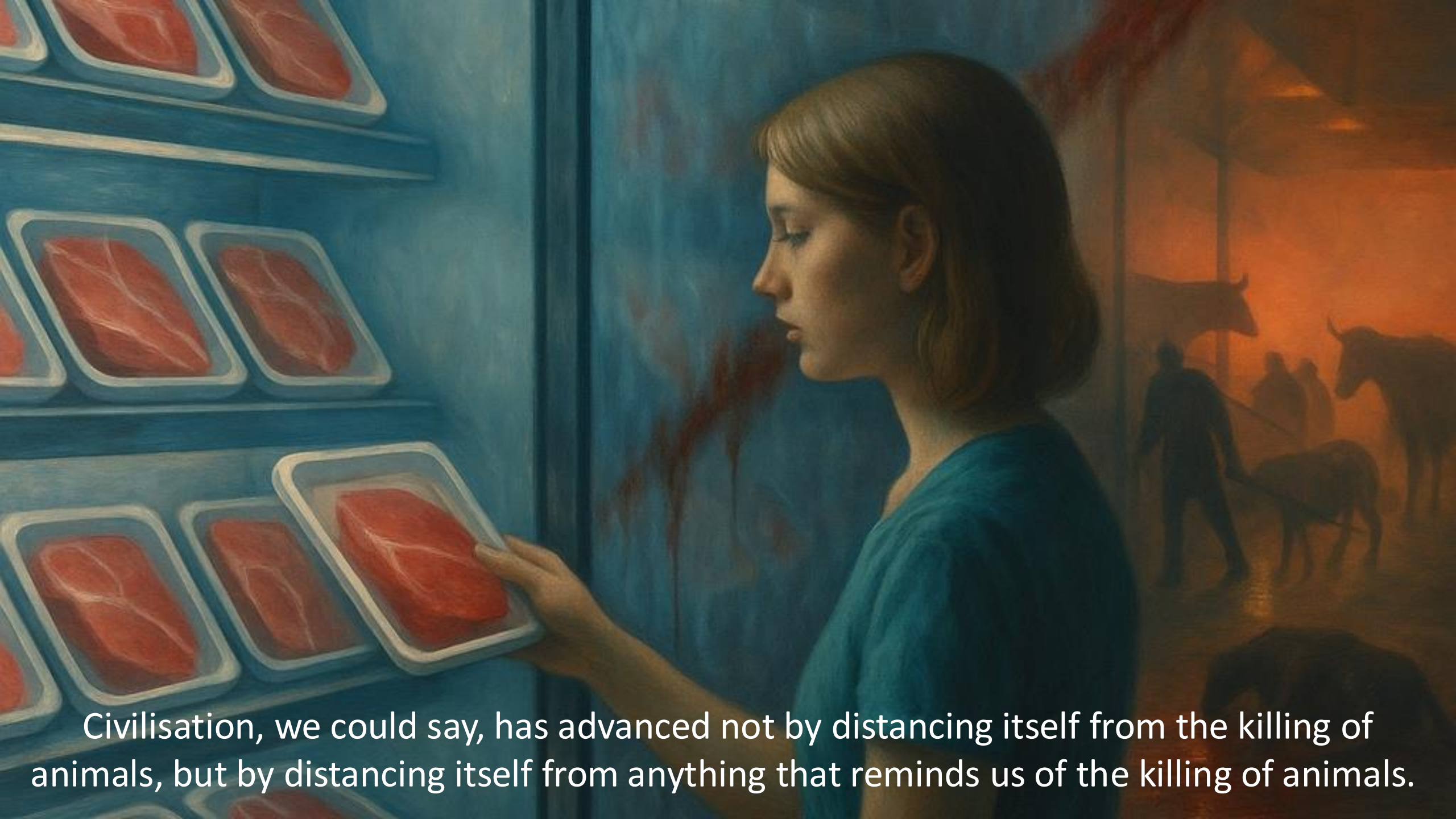


III. 3: The Metropolitan Cattle Market, Islington, was opened in 1855 by the Prince Consort to replace Smithfield. Despite a location adjacent to the Great Northern Railway, drovers were still driving flocks and herds through city streets.

Meat was **also symbol of power** for the ruling classes and those who ate less meat were said to be '**uncivilized**' and doomed to live half as long as '**civilized races**.'

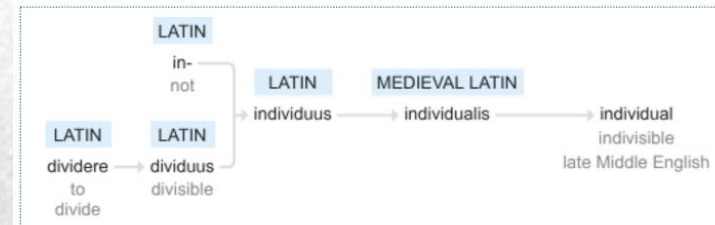
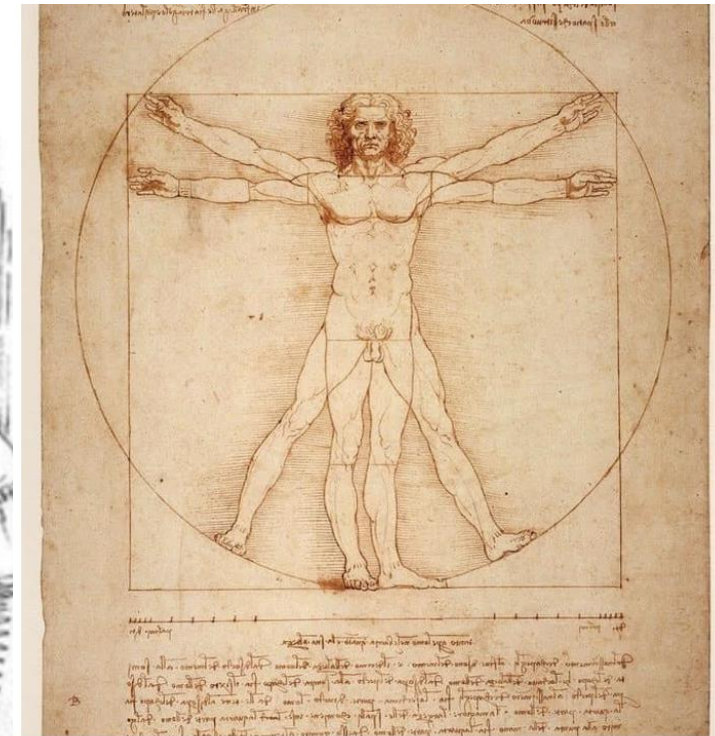
Defining themselves as distinct from **the animal world**, the '**civilized classes**' preferred not to **recognize the origins** of the meat they consumed (Otter, 2020)!

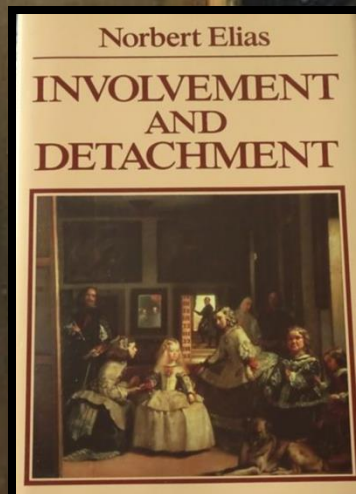




Civilisation, we could say, has advanced not by distancing itself from the killing of animals, but by distancing itself from anything that reminds us of the killing of animals.

Elias traces the rise of these individual civilised values back in time to the Renaissance period, when developments in art and science underpinned the belief that education could facilitate human knowledge and progress...

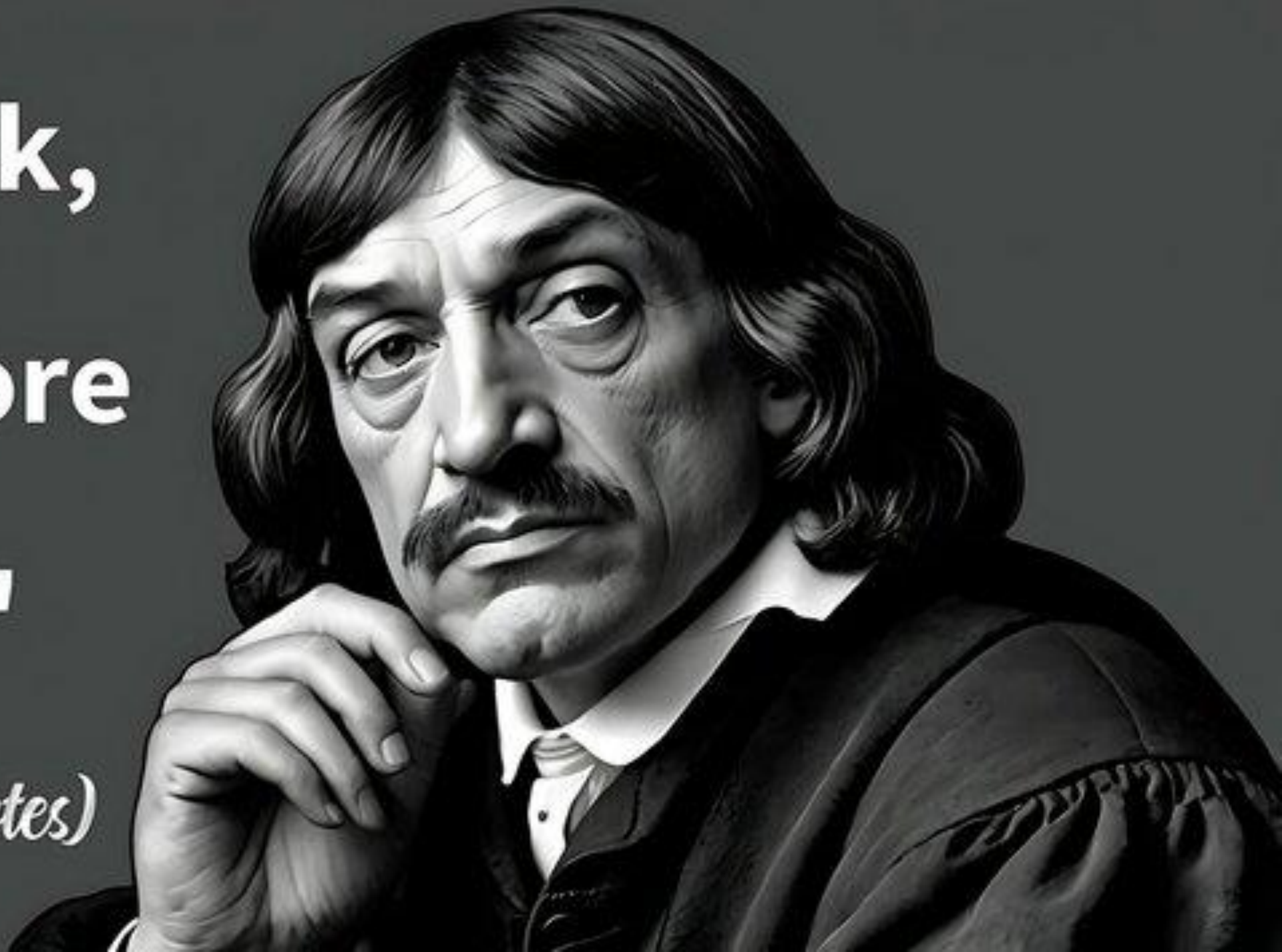




Velázquez's Iconic *Las Meninas* (1656) Painting

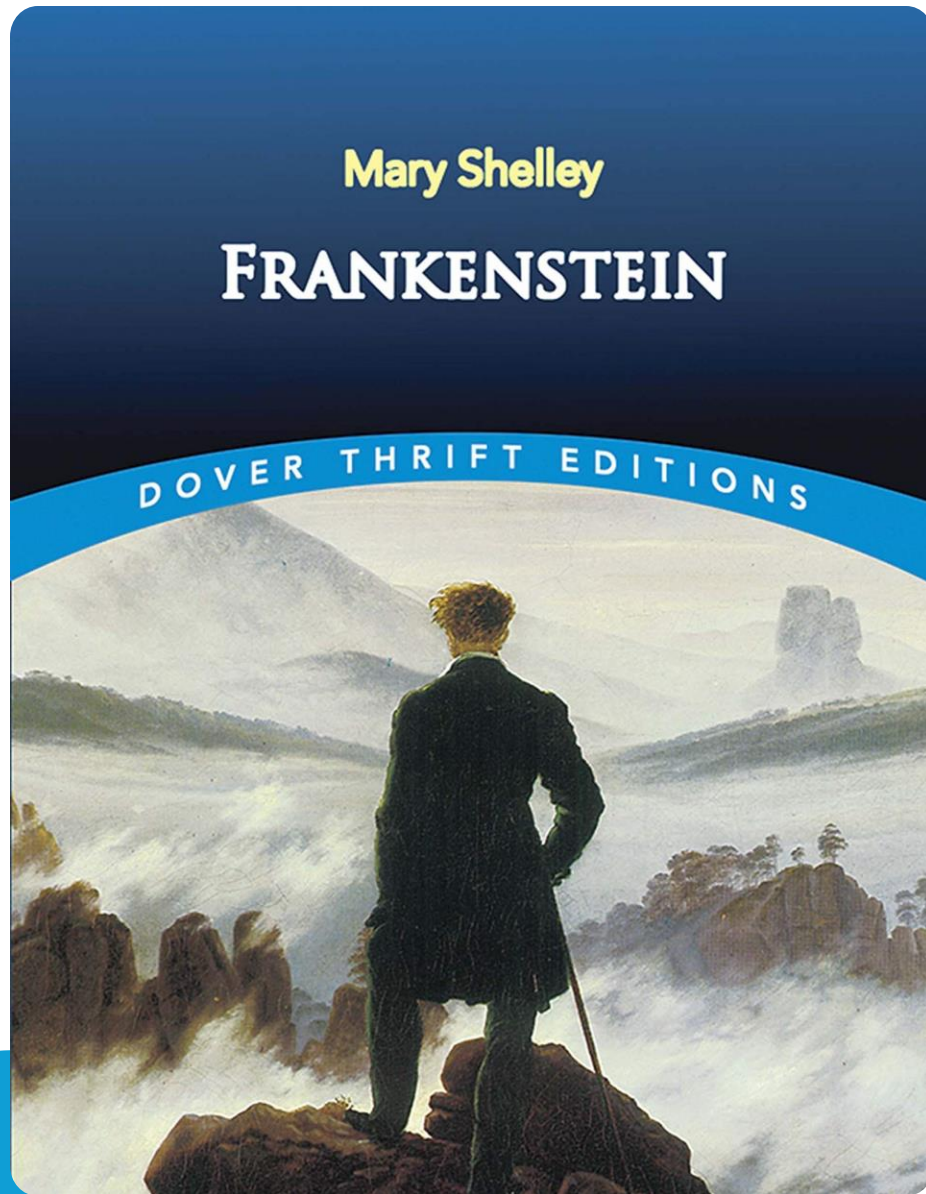
"I think,
therefore
I am"

(René Descartes)



- To reiterate, as society became more complex and individuals were required to live with each other in ever greater numbers, sensitivities to diverse aspects of human behaviour intensified.
- While the carving of dead animals at the table was at one time acceptable, over time any reminder that meat came from killing animals was to be avoided at all costs (Elias, 2012).

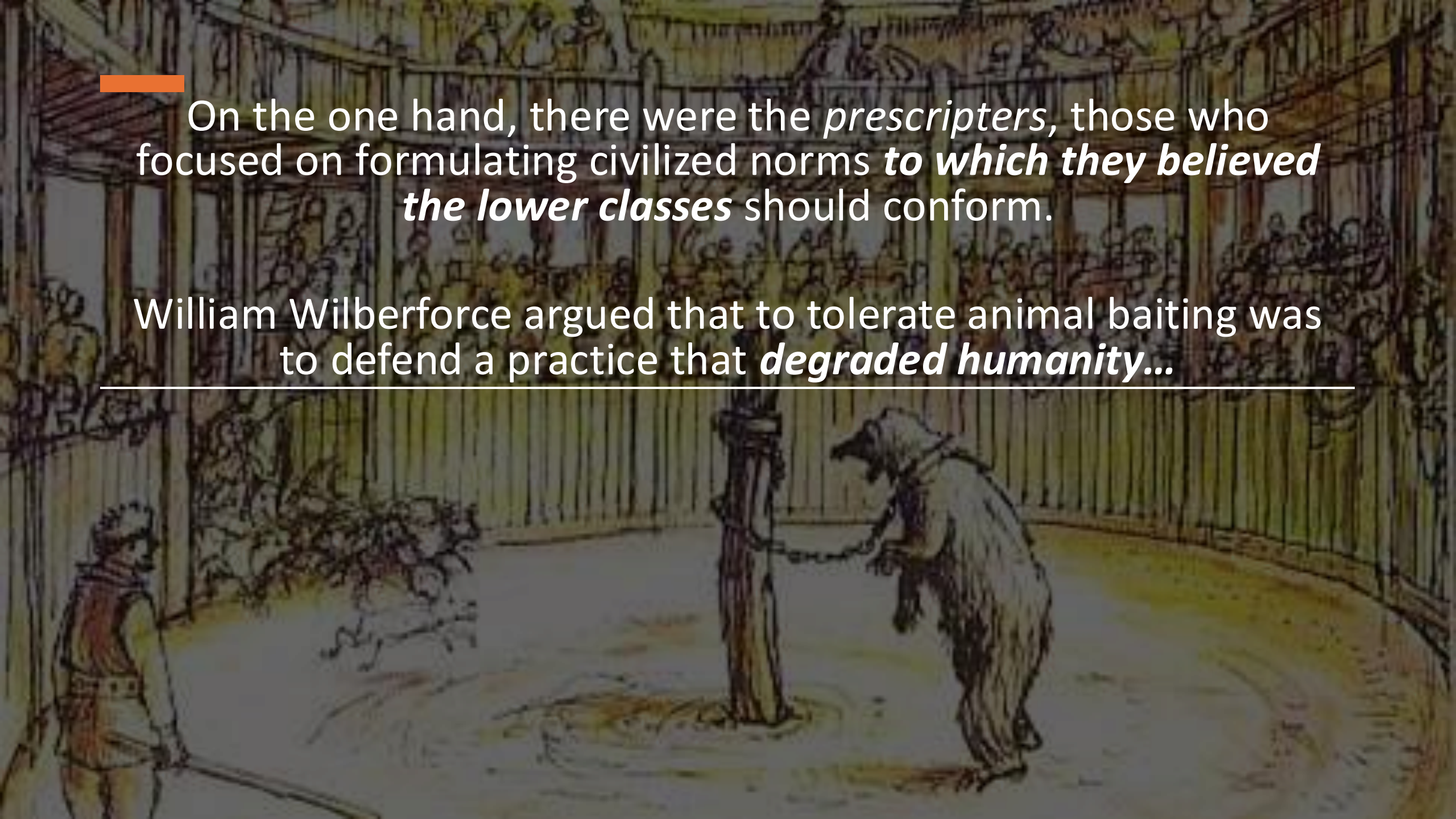




- As faith in science and technology fostered a greater sense of control and aesthetic appreciation of nature, social changes occurred.
- Mary Shelley's novel Frankenstein reflects these shifts, illustrating the impact of science and technology and the lessening of fears about nature.
- As people had more time to think about themselves as individuals, concerns for nature and animal welfare started to appear in society!



In relation to the growth of concerns for non-human animals at this time, Traini (2016) focusses specifically on the rise of two influential middle-class groups...

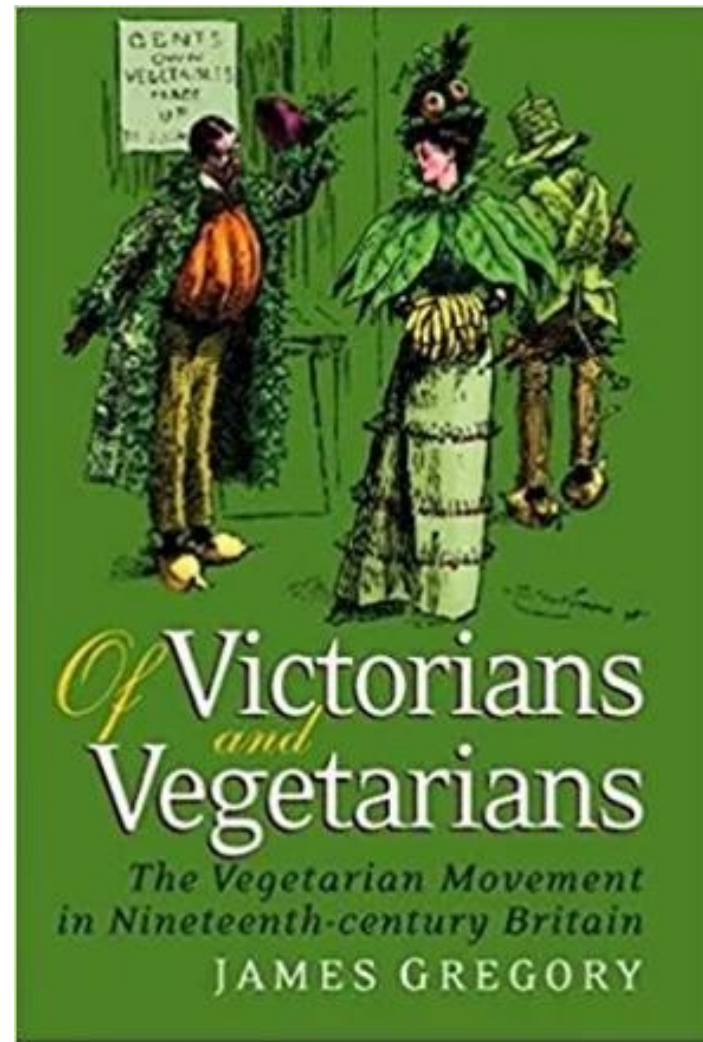
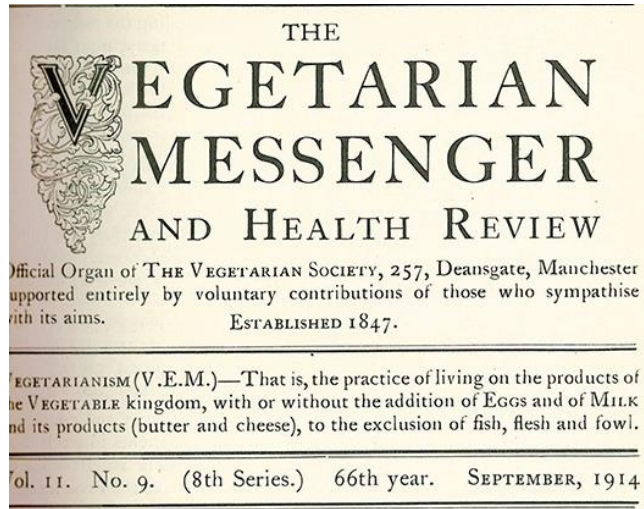
An illustration of a bear baiting scene. In the foreground, a man in a red vest and white shirt stands on the left, holding a long stick. A large bear is chained to a wooden post in the center. The background shows a crowd of people watching from behind a fence. The scene is set in an outdoor arena.

On the one hand, there were the *prescriptors*, those who focused on formulating civilized norms ***to which they believed the lower classes*** should conform.

William Wilberforce argued that to tolerate animal baiting was to defend a practice that ***degraded humanity...***



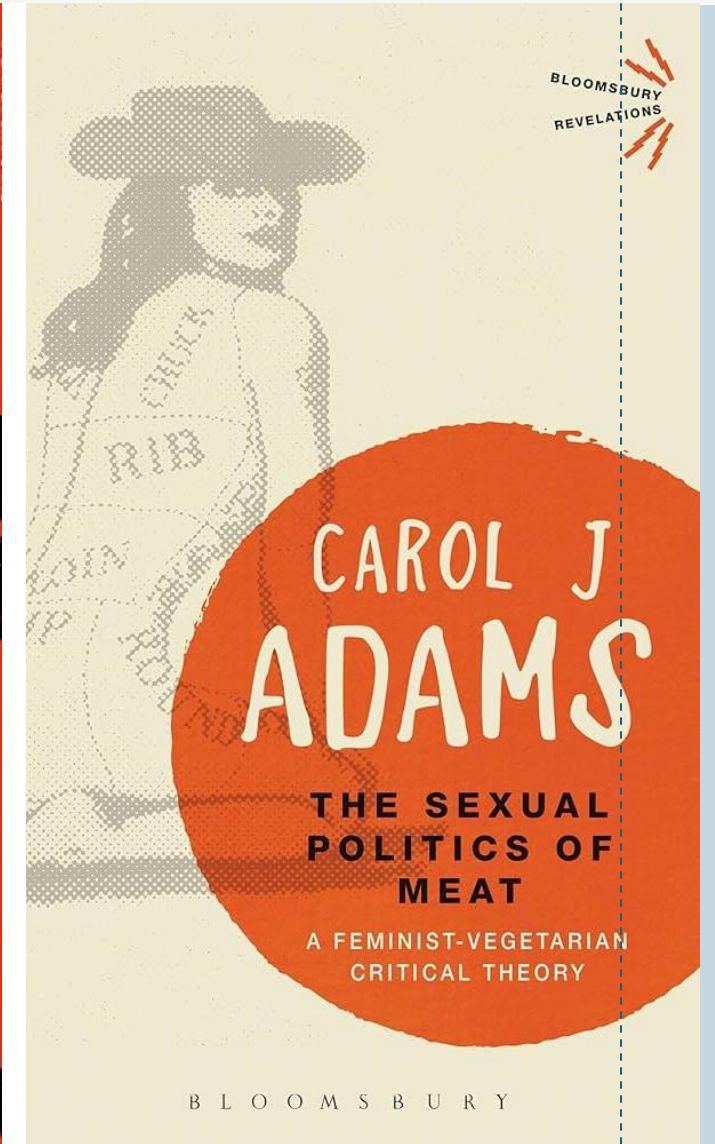
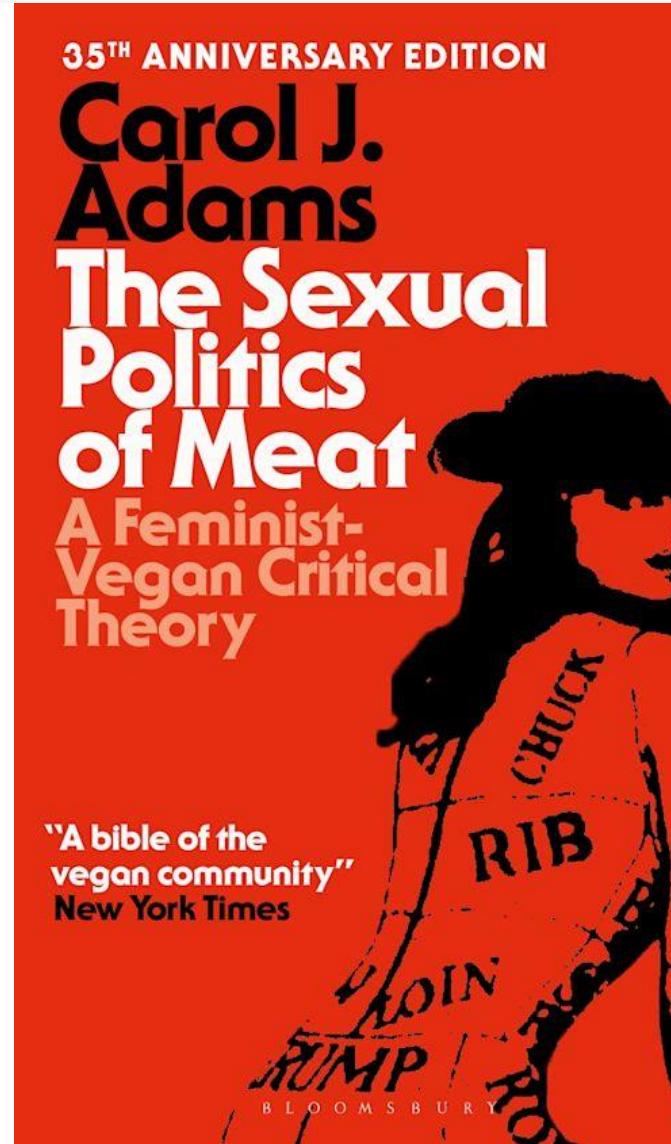
On the other hand, there were the *ascetics*, those who ***were able to control and adjust their behaviour*** to bring about improvements in the moral order through, for example, the adoption of vegetarianism.



During the 19th century, the middle classes' ability to control their impulses made a profound contribution to the process of civilization (Traïni, 2016).

As a reaction against the ethos of science & technology, urban movements such as vegetarianism emerged as markers of civilized values in the city (Fiddes, 1991).

- Because they have already chosen a lifestyle that Elias regards as inevitable for *'civilised' societies*, he considers people that do not eat meat to be ahead of their time.
- And it is precisely because vegetarians are in a sense *too civilised* that they are perceived to be radical by the meat-eating majority that criticises departures from time-honoured culinary and dietary practices...



VEGETARIAN SOCIETY,

75, PRINCESS STREET, MANCHESTER.

ESTABLISHED A.D. 1847.

President—The Rev. Professor John E. B. Mayor, M.A., Senior Fellow of St. John's Cambridge.

Treasurer—Edwin Collier, Esq., Manchester.

Vice-Presidents:—

W. E. A. Axon, Esq., F.R.S.L., Manchester.
Edmund J. Baillie, Esq., F.L.S., Chester.
Miss Brotherton, Seedley, Manchester.
The Hon. F. J. Bruce, Arbroath, N.B.
The Rev. James Clark, Salford.
The Rev. H. S. Clubb, Philadelphia.
Edwin Collier, Esq., Manchester.
General J. M. Earle, London.
Peter Foxcroft, Esq., Glazebrook
J. W. Goddard, Esq., Leicester.
D. Gostling, Esq., Bombay.
T. Anderson Hanson, Esq., London.
Edward Hare, Esq., C.S.I., Bath.
William Harrison, Esq., Manchester.

Rev. John Higgins, Melbourne
A. F. Hills, Esq., London.
A. O. Hume, Esq., C.B., Simla.
T. C. Lowe, Esq., B.A., Hamstead Hill School,
Birmingham.
Edward Maitland, Esq., B.A., London.
John Malcolm, Esq., F.R.C.S. Eng.
The Rev. W. J. Monk, M.A., Dodington Vicarage.
James Parrott, Esq., Salford.
Isaac Pitman, Esq., Bath.
H. Rickards, Esq., Douglas, Isle-of-Man.
H. S. Salt, Esq., London.
Mrs. John Smith, Glasgow.
J. J. Willis, Esq., Austwick.

Foreign and Colonial Representatives.

AMERICA: Rev. W. P. Alcott, Boxford, Mass., U.S.A. Elder F. W. Evans, Shaker Settlement,
Mount Lebanon, New York, U.S.A.

Executive Committee:—

Mr. Ernest Axon.	Mr. Robert Gibbon.	Mr. W. Huntington.	Mr. A. C. Warren
Mr. James Booth.	Mr. J. J. Greenhalgh.	Mrs. Joseph Knight.	Mr T. J. Wood.
Mr. A. W. Duncan, F.C.S.	Mrs. W. Harrison.	Mr. Joseph Roberts.	

Honorary Auditor—Mr. Alfred Tongue, F.C.A. Seedley, Manchester.

Honorary Librarian—Mr. Ernest Axon. | *Honorary Secretary*—Mr. William E. A. Axon,
Secretary—Mr. Joseph Knight.

NOTE.—All Communications to be directed, not to individuals, but to
THE VEGETARIAN SOCIETY, 75, PRINCESS STREET, MANCHESTER.

AIMS.—To induce habits of abstinence from the Flesh of Animals (Fish, Flesh, Fowl) as Food, and to promote the use of fruits, pulse, cereals, and other products of the Vegetable Kingdom.

SUBSCRIPTIONS.—The Society is supported by (a) Members, (b) Associates, and (c) Subscribers, to each of whom the Society's Magazine (*The Vegetarian Messenger*) is posted monthly. Supporters of each class contribute a minimum subscription of half-a-crown a year. Minimum subscription for West Indies, etc., 3s.; India, China, etc., 3s. 6d.; Australasia, South Africa, etc., 4s. Remittances are requested in Cheques (payable to Edwin Collier), or Postal Orders. If stamps are sent, halfpenny postages are preferred.

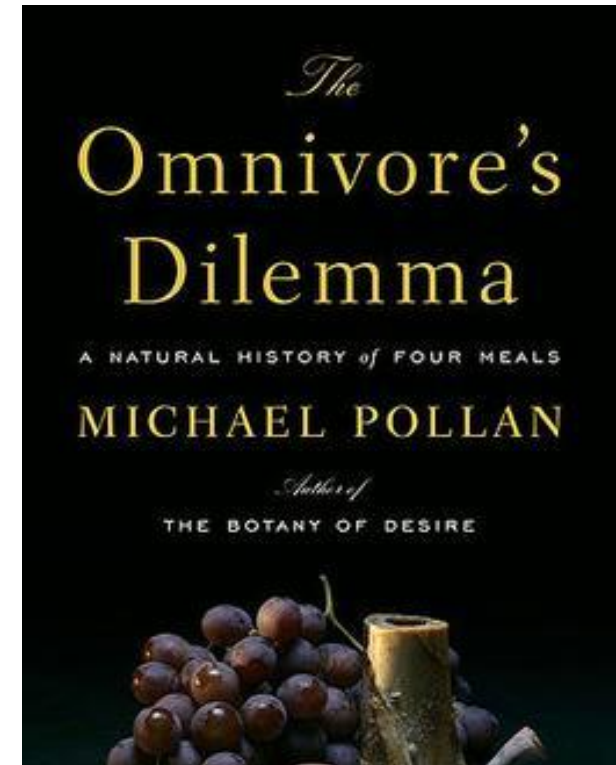
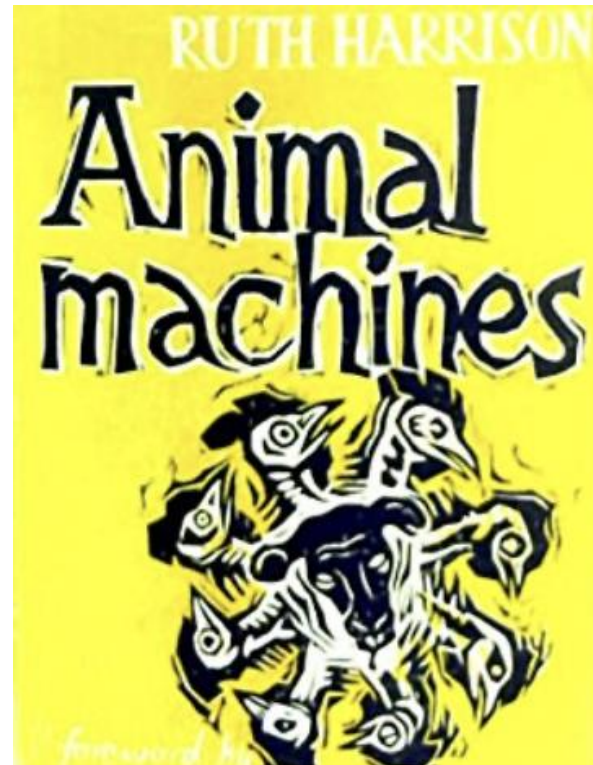
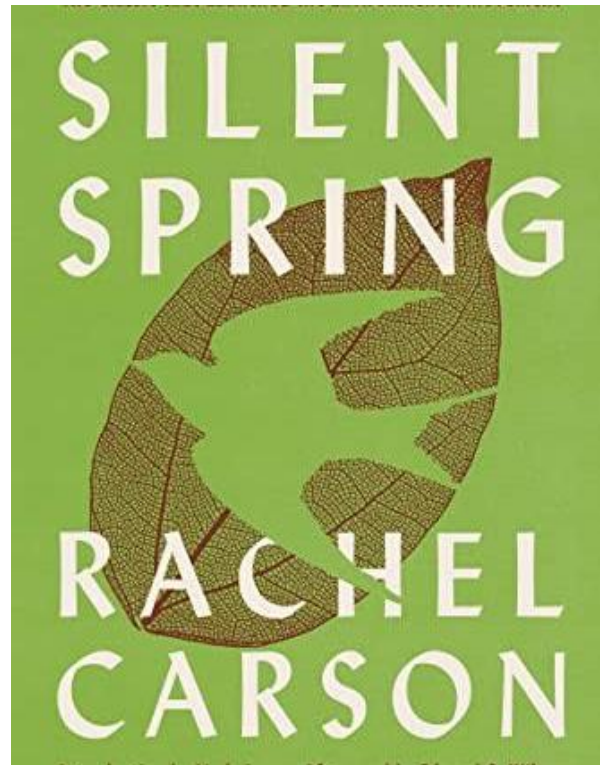
CONSTITUTION.—The Society is constituted of a President, Vice-Presidents, Treasurer, an Executive Committee, a Secretary, and an unlimited number of Members and Associates, who have subscribed to the Declaration of the Society. The Forms of Declaration may be obtained on application.

DEFINITIONS.—(a) A "Member" agrees to adopt the Vegetarian system of Diet (i.e.,

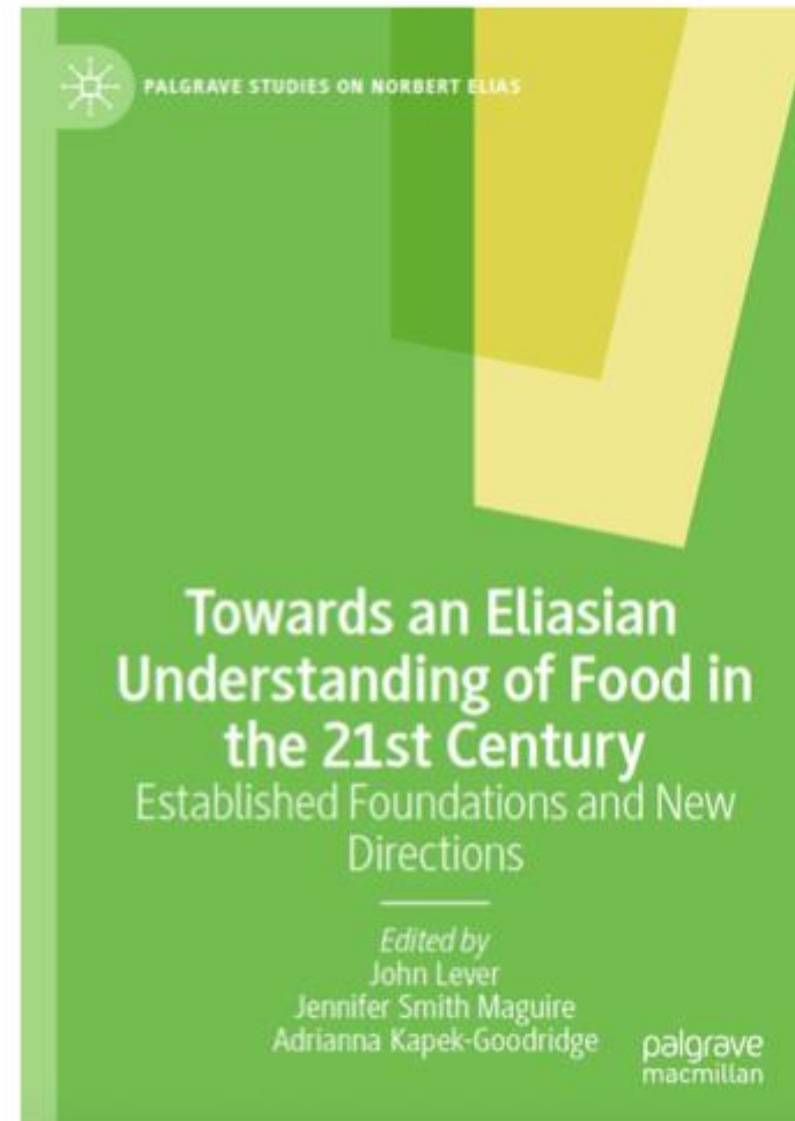


- **Where does our food come from?**
- **How is our food produced?**

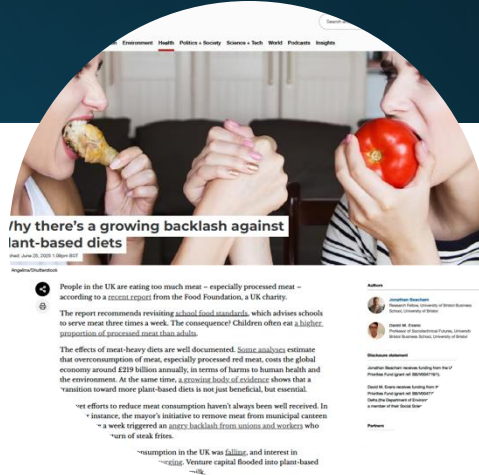
During the 20th century questions started to be raised about meat production and the food system in general, and new collective notions of '**we-ness**' started to emerge around animal welfare, food, and environment...



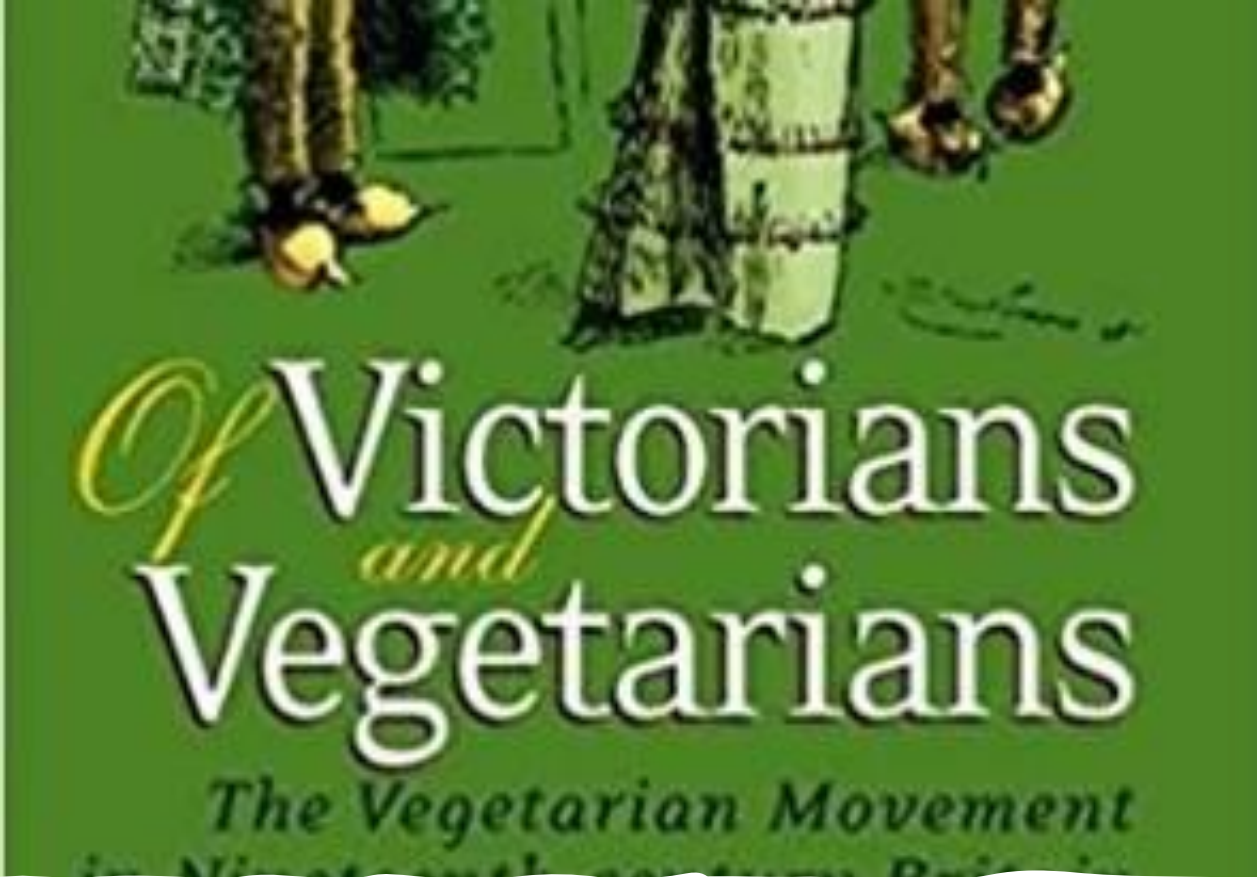
- In traditional foraging societies, the origins of food was shared as community knowledge, reinforcing a strong sense of ***We-identity***.
- In modern industrial societies, by contrast, the balance has shifted towards ***I-identities*** and individuals have become detached from the food on their plates.
- But the civilising process continues through new food movements and related ***We-identities*** focussed on ***local food, plant-based diets, and veganism.***



The rise of the 'civilized' plant-based burger...



- Alternative protein burgers and plant-based products are helping people to transition away from meat, but meat industry critics often position such products as elitist...
- While they help us to move away from meat's harmful impacts, such products also keep meat on the plate by mirroring its characteristics (i.e., texture, aroma, taste)...



The politics of sight?

From the 19th century onwards, the politics of sight tried to make the violence of slaughter visible, and vegetarian ethics were often sparked in response to animal suffering...

The Sexual Politics of Meat

A Feminist- Vegan Critical Theory

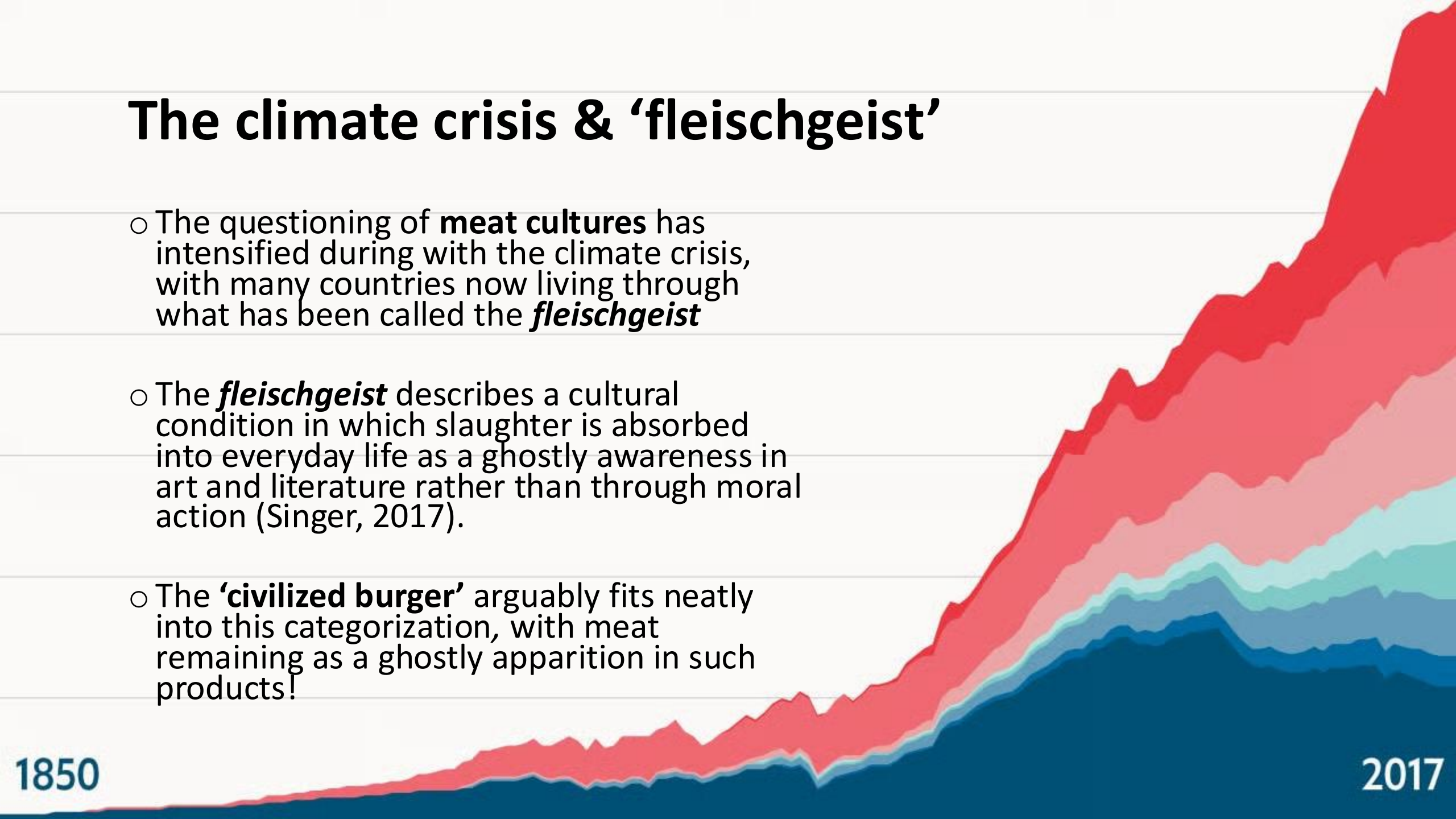


**Hidden in
plain sight?**

In the age of the 'civilized burger', products are *mediated* through various forms of aesthetic presentation that attempt to stimulate the experience of eating meat while erasing the animal body...

The climate crisis & 'fleischgeist'

- The questioning of **meat cultures** has intensified during with the climate crisis, with many countries now living through what has been called the *fleischgeist*
- The *fleischgeist* describes a cultural condition in which slaughter is absorbed into everyday life as a ghostly awareness in art and literature rather than through moral action (Singer, 2017).
- The '**civilized burger**' arguably fits neatly into this categorization, with meat remaining as a ghostly apparition in such products!





The slaughterhouse and the climate crisis...

- In this context, Richard Twain (2024) argues that the slaughterhouse remains a 'cultural secret' that now hinders understanding of the climate crisis.
- Shielding children from the realities of meat production reinforces this secrecy, he argues, maintaining a taboo that still conflicts with cultural pretensions of civility!





As a sociological marker of the ***fleischgeist***, raising and supporting children not to eat meat is one of the most preemptive moves we can make (Twain, 2024)

The politics of sight

Thank you...

