ANIMAL TO EDIBLE

Noëlie Vialles

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INTRODUCTION

Abattoirs may seem an odd and, to many people, slightly disturbing subject to be interested in, given the bloody images they conjure up and the repugnant sensory impressions they arouse. Even those who work in them do not hide their surprise at being the focus of attention for no obvious professional reason. Why not choose a less repellent field of study? This at least indicates how far the representations of which they know themselves to be the object are internalised – to the extent, in fact, of implicitly reflecting them back on the intruder, who is then almost suspected of having dubious motives (why this desire to become acquainted with things that everyone 'normally', in the absence of some compelling obligation, prefers not to know about?).

Ethnologists themselves not infrequently react in much the same way, though their concern is at a purely professional level. Where, they wonder, is the pleasure to be had in such a study, the implication being that without some pleasurable experience ethnological fieldwork is mostly drudgery and tedium?

If what is meant is that abattoirs are hardly likely to delight the senses, no one will disagree (certainly not anyone who is familiar with such places). If what is meant is that the sort of people found there, notably slaughterers, could not possibly provide rewarding company, this can only be seen as an example of the common prejudice regarding such people. However, one of the ethnologist's professional obligations is to overcome every kind of prejudice and not exclude a single human being from the human race, which is his/her field of study. *Nihil humanum* ...

Finally, if by pleasure is meant the satisfaction of learning and seeking to understand, what is really being asked is this: what intellectual motivation, what concrete question directed attention towards this particular field of activity? Quite simply, it is this: what is meat?

What is meat?

The question may appear pointless, even slightly naive. In our somewhat overfed societies, meat is a familiar reality, found on our tables, in our kitchens, even on the street (in the butcher's shop window). We distinguish

various kinds of meat, indicating preferences for one or another. We speak of 'red', 'white', or 'dark' meats, light or fortifying meats, healthy or heavy meats, and so on. We attribute various qualities to them; above all it is 'butcher's meat' that we think of as 'true meat'. But what is 'butcher's meat' exactly? Does pork count as butcher's meat, or is it the province of the *charcutier* [as the French pork butcher is called]? Or take goat, which is marketed by poulterers: does that count as butcher's meat? And what of poultry, rabbits, game? Even the most superficial glance would suggest that we distinguish 'infra' and 'ultra' meats. Possibly 'true meat' (e.g., Méchin 1983, p. 98; see below, References, pp. 135 ff.) is in fact a norm. At least, it is not something that is immediately obvious.

> We know that for a very long time *viande* [the French word for 'meat'] meant all types of food, not just animal flesh as food. Think of the Italian *vivanda*, which has the same root. Until the eighteenth century the expression 'Lenten meat' [*viande de carême*] was used to refer to fish. In the same way as *viande* eventually came to signify animal flesh as food, the Greek word *opson* usually meant sardine or anchovy. To the point where 'fish' in modern Greek is *psari*, a derivative of *opson*. The development of vocabulary often provides a very clear indication of the way in which a society's eating habits evolved (Revel 1979, p. 82).

Bloch and Wartburg's 'Etymological Dictionary of the French Language' gives under '*viande*':

> until the seventeenth century, denotes any type of food; ... specialised in the modern sense from the seventeenth century onwards ... Latin *vivenda*, 'that which is used for life', derived from *vivere*, 'to live' (Bloch and Wartburg 1932, Vol. II, p. 367).

As we see, meat is what sustains life, so it is understandable that, even while the meaning narrowed down, it retained the initial connotation of a very exalted type of food. But what is 'animal flesh as food', exactly? What is the 'modern sense' of the word?

Asked this question, a wide variety of respondents supplied answers that are summed up pretty well in the technical wording of one vet's definition: meat is 'an edible product of animal origin'. And eggs, milk? Fish, molluscs, crustaceans? 'Naturally', these are excluded, but implicitly, because this is something that 'goes by itself'. It goes *without saying* that not all animals' flesh can be eaten, that the flesh of certain animals is not meat, and that meat is obtained only by slaughter. In addition to these implicit assumptions there are various customs. For instance, some birds are regarded not as meat but as fish. This was so of puffins in England, at least in medieval times (Jackson, in Kuper 1981, p. 47, n. 1; Lister 1986, p. 43); it was also true in France (and still is, by many accounts) of birds that live in an aquatic environment and eat mainly fish. Habitat and feeding habits are thus more important than species as regards defining the human culinary category in which an animal is placed.

We are familiar with the provisions that Moses laid down regarding permitted animals and how they were to be killed and cooked, and we know of his ban on consuming their blood. We also know that these ritual standards, in dedicating the children of Israel to 'purity' (in other words to separation from their 'idolatrous' neighbours), formed part of an organised world view. Christianity very soon abandoned these arrangements, announcing particularly through St Paul that 'everything that God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected when it is taken with thanksgiving' (I Timothy 4:4; NEB); nevertheless, for economic reasons Christian teaching was to retain the ban on blood and 'anything that has been strangled' (e.g., Acts 15:20) for a time, and from the seventh century onwards it several times prohibited the eating of horseflesh (Lizet 1982). So we are not, apparently, in thrall to any strict, normative eating code. However, we are undoubtedly heirs to a particular cultural history (in which the Christian influence is not the only one), since we do conform to rules in the matter of food, particularly meat. We do not regard the flesh of all animals as food, we eat very little blood, with the notable exception of pig's blood, and we reject 'dead meats' and 'anything that has been strangled' (except for the famous *canard au sang*, though this has not necessarily been strangled; see Pomiane [1924] 1952, p. 279).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, meat is obtained only by slaughtering animals. Animals that have died a natural death or have died as the result of illness or accident are thought of as being unfit to eat. So there has to be slaughter. Not every sort of slaughter produces meat, though: the animal's blood must be shed. On these two points the provisions of the Mosaic law and the regulations governing abattoirs are in full agreement.

Yet slaughter, whether ritual or regulation, is still not sufficient to obtain meat. A further requisite is that it be applied to a permitted species. If a cat were killed like a rabbit and popped in the pot, we should still find it shocking and far from appetising, because cat is 'not eaten'. It was the presumption and sometimes the certainty of this kind of practice (and many others even more dreadful) that accounted for the poor reputation of the old 'pieman' (Sébillot 1981, pp. 68–71).

However, this killing is something we would rather know nothing about. In former times, sacrifices were solemn occasions celebrated in public. Later, slaughterhouses operated in the middle of towns, when animals were not actually killed in the street. Nowadays, slaughtering has become an invisible, exiled, almost clandestine activity. We know it goes on, of course, but it is an abstract kind of knowledge. We have no wish to eat corpses (we are carnivores, not carrion-eaters), so animals have to be slaughtered. But we demand an ellipsis between animal and meat. Advertisers are well aware of this and take scrupulous account of it; they need, for example, to be very careful how they vaunt the 'flavour' of French lamb or the 'punch' packed by beef. 'Ancestral taboos' about blood, which in the Middle Ages put butchers in the

same category as executioners, barbers, and surgeons (Le Goff 1977, p. 93), still live on today, accounting for our confusion in the presence of men whose principal occupation is to slaughter animals: '*In reality* the butcher does not kill, he works; but *in truth* he kills, and therein lies the whole mystery' (Legendre 1978, p. 856).

Certainly the butcher enjoys a quieter image nowadays. He is no longer witnessed killing animals; in fact it has become unusual for him to practise slaughtering himself. Private slaughtering is now illegal, and it has become possible for us to be unaware that the skilled hand we see trimming the meat was the instrument of the animal's death. 'Dispensed from himself doing the slaughtering, the urban butcher is henceforth required only to handle an anonymous flesh reduced to its cold materiality', writes Pierre Gascar (Gascar 1973, p. 105), who goes on to analyse the benefit that we draw from this 'dispensation':

> The individuality and physical outline of the animal, abruptly reinforced in the brief death struggle, is replaced through the butcher's art by countless quarters, cuts, joints, and pieces of offal that have been familiar to us in shape and appearance for long enough to have acquired a certain autonomy in our eyes, a reality independent of the whole in which they were once comprised ... No more bullock, no more death. The butcher's shop has become a place of innocence. (*ibid.*, p. 124)

However, that 'innocence' results only from having transferred to other people the mark of blood of which today's butcher has virtually been washed clean. Who those other people are we simply do not wish to know; the mere thought of their existence somehow gives us the shivers. We are paradoxical carnivores, deeming suspect a job that has to be done. How, we wonder, could anyone be a slaughterer?

Granted, this is not the only case in which conflicting demands come together in this way. Nearly all the circumstances in which we look for the 'clean' lead us to reject, along with the 'dirty', the people who get rid of dirt for us. Even the preoccupation with cleanliness, once it leads us to look more closely into ways of providing it, seems slightly unhealthy, as witness Parent-Duchâtelet's astonishing contemporary account of prostitution in early nineteenth-century Paris (Parent-Duchâtelet [1836] 1981).

Our rejection of the 'dirty' is the more vigorous, the more closely it threatens us and the more viscerally it affects us. Thus everything to do with death, be it that of men or of animals, is kept firmly in the background, even when we set great store by the end achieved thereby. 'The whitening instinct of white Anglo–Saxon America' is not sufficient to engender a frank acceptance of the 'morticians' who nevertheless flourish there; the fact that pathologists contribute towards medical progress does not make us any the less mistrustful of them; in fact one of their number has said that, for members of such professions, 'an honest answer to the question of what one does for a living has every chance of spoiling the party in no time' (Gonzalez-Crussi 1984).

Similarly, it has been suggested that the most ardent advocates of the death penalty would be loath to invite to dinner the man whom French, with steadfast euphemism, calls an *exécuteur des hautes oeuvres* (Delarue 1979, p. 30). In exactly the same way, our massive consumption of meat and meat products does nothing to warm our hearts towards those who slaughter the animals concerned.

We thus make a threefold distinction: in terms of our demands, in terms of the realities, and between people. We want the obverse of the coin but without the reverse. So what do they do, the people who are directly confronted on the reverse? That is to say, what do we do when (what would we do if) forced to face up to this alimentary murder?

If we stick to the reassuring (yet at the same time disturbing) prejudice that makes us think of those who perform these essential tasks as being somehow different, we do indeed gain by keeping them at a distance from our 'normality', attributing their acceptance of such activity to some kind of deviance, some socially useful but psychologically perverted pathology. However, even if there were some truth in this hypothesis, it would not be enough to let us completely off the hook. The negative choices made by a culture are as significant as its positive choices, and the same impulse leads it to deliver models of good behaviour as to deliver models of shocking behaviour (Devereux [1970] 1977, ch. 8). We must therefore reject this convenient dichotomy in order to examine how our culture proceeds when brought face to face with the death of animals, since neither is vegetarianism prevalent in it, nor do the vegetarians contrive at best to do more than stir our sensibilities without significantly altering what we do.

With this, a close study of slaughtering takes on an anthropological dimension.

Theoretical demarcation

Nothing in the question underlying this study dictated the choice of the Adour region; that was prompted simply by reasons of convenience as regarded carrying out the relevant fieldwork. The geographical boundary coincides more or less with administrative boundaries, taking in the four *départements* of Pyrénées-Atlantiques, Hautes-Pyrénées, Gers, and Landes. There is no strictly ethnological relevance in this grouping, but nor is there anything wildly inappropriate. If our aim is to perceive a regional unity as well as local variations, the choice of territory allows us to do this, offering as it does both the overall homogeneity of a reduced 'South West' (the Garonne valley being excluded) and the internal diversity guaranteed by the different ethnic regions of Gascony, Béarn, and the Basque Country.

Nevertheless, the conceptual demarcation is the more important one, being directly bound up with the question behind the study. Granted, the same

question could equally well have led to a study of hunting, fishing, the domestic killing of pigs or poultry, or the industrial slaughter of the same. But apart from the fact that entering any field involves making an opening somewhere (and the further fact that certain aspects of the potential field have been covered quite thoroughly already), the slaughter of large livestock is not only less familiar but lies at the very heart of the problem of 'butcher's meat' or 'true meat'.

Even defined this narrowly, the relevant field of activity presents major variations with regard to volume, plant, and consequently methods used. Some abattoirs are genuinely industrial, others still operate very much on an artisan scale. Accordingly, the people who work in them neither enjoy the same working conditions, nor possess the same skills, nor have the same training behind them. Yet everywhere the same decisive transformation is effected.

Right from the initial contact, it became clear that this already restricted delimitation was going to be reduced still further. The fact is that although, seen from outside, the study of abattoirs, of slaughtering, and hence of slaughtermen would seem to amount to much the same thing, this is far from being the case.

A number of activities come together on the premises of an abattoir or slaughterhouse [the words are interchangeable in English usage]:

Animals enter the premises alive and leave in the form of carcasses. 'Buying live and selling dead' is the definition of the work of the wholesale butcher. This involves the provision of refrigerated storage rooms and sometimes cutting rooms as well, to which must be added the personnel responsible for transporting the animals on the one hand and the meat on the other. Some retail butchers do their own buying and transporting to the abattoir of the animals they have arranged to have slaughtered there. Lastly, private individuals also bring animals to be slaughtered for their own domestic consumption (this applies particularly to calves and pigs, which are then stored in freezers or in accordance with traditional methods).

The animals may spend several hours in waiting pens [collectively called lairage, in English] before being slaughtered. The upkeep of the pens and the care of the animals are the responsibility of cattlemen.

Animals and carcasses are subject to hygiene controls, which are provided by a staff of vets and inspectors.

The abattoir as workplace has its own personnel providing constant maintenance and cleaning services.

By-products are treated or stored before being removed from the premises, so there are also tripe-dressing rooms, gut rooms, and places for the curing of hides, together with the requisite personnel.

An abattoir produces waste. The liquid effluent usually undergoes initial

treatment on site before being dispatched to municipal purification plants or straight into a sewage main. Solid waste on the other hand is regularly removed in tankers and taken away to rendering establishments, of which there are very few: some 90 per cent of the waste from the abattoirs of these four *départements* is taken away and treated by a single Agen company.

Very occasionally (in two abattoirs only) blood is collected, in which case bleeding is done by trocar (see figures 28–31, and below, pp. 84–5). Chilled and subsequently congealed, the blood is sold to manufacturers of pharmaceutical products. The process requires few staff (one or two persons) but suitable premises and equipment.

Almost invariably in the case of public abattoirs a caretaker or manager will have accommodation on the premises in order to provide a round-the-clock emergency slaughtering service. Where this is not the case, everyone knows who should be contacted in an emergency, at least through the local vets.

Finally, whether the abattoir is private or public, its activities are organised and controlled by managers, administrators, and an accounts department, assisted in the case of the larger abattoirs by a secretariat.

Without losing sight of these many activities, the present study will concentrate on the work of slaughterers, since it is this that constitutes the core of our problem.

Concrete diversity

In the four *départements* under consideration, abattoirs in both the private and public sectors are distributed as follows:

1. *Number of abattoirs*

département	public	private	total
Pyrénées-Atlantiques	8	2	10
Hautes-Pyrénées	6	0	6
Landes	5	0	5
Gers	8	3	11
total	27	5	32

The map reproduced as figure 3 shows their geographical distribution.

Volumes of activity vary enormously, from 100 tonnes [metric tons] a year to more than 12,000. Figure 2 takes no account of private abattoirs, which do not always issue precise figures. This much can be said, however: one

private abattoir in Gers *département* slaughters approximately 10,000 tonnes a year, while the rest, which specialise in slaughtering pigs, seem appreciably smaller. Here we confine ourselves to round-number quantities gathered *in situ*. We were able to consult the studies available to departmental veterinary services; however, except in Landes *département*, recent changes that in some cases substantially altered the quantities dealt with by abattoirs have not yet been taken into account in the periodic evaluations. The closure of some of the very small abattoirs, major technical improvements, spectacular modernisations of dilapidated premises, and the arrival or departure of the clientele of a wholesaler-shipper are among the changes that can very quickly modify quantities slaughtered.

2. *Distribution of tonnages (in metric tons)*

annual tonnages	Pyrénées-Atlantiques	Hautes-Pyrénées	Landes	Gers	total no. of abattoirs	total tonnages
≡ 12,000	2				2	23,000
≡ 8,000				2	2	16,000
5,500–4,000	1	1	1		3	14,500
3,500–3,000		1	1	1	3	9,700
2,800–2,000	2		2	1	5	11,800
1,300–1,200	1	1		1	3	3,800
950–650	1	1		2	4	3,000
400–100	1	2	1	1	5	1,350
tonnage per *dépt.*	35,800	10,120	12,950	24,280	27	83,150

Figure 2 calls for some elaboration:

The four largest abattoirs between them handle nearly half the tonnage slaughtered in the four *départements*. Two of them are in Pyrénées-Atlantique (Pau, Anglet), the other two in Gers (Auch, Miélan). This arrangement suggests a bi-polarisation of slaughtering facilities that coincides more with cattle-rearing areas than with centres of consumption. This is in line with a policy U-turn as regards siting abattoirs. It used to be the case that large abattoirs were built in the vicinity of centres of consumption, until it became clear that it would make just as much sense to put them near areas of production, the reason being that transporting meat in refrigerator vans tends to pose fewer practical problems than transporting live cattle. Nationally, for example, very large abattoirs have been set up in the key cattle-rearing areas of Poitou-Charentes, Charolais, and Lyonnais. On a smaller scale, the same type of distribution can be seen here.

The mean national tonnage (total tonnage divided by number of abattoirs)

is between 4,000 and 5,000 tonnes a year. As figure 2 shows, this volume is achieved by only three of our abattoirs, almost two-thirds of which handle fewer than 2,800 tonnes a year. Probably at least half of these small abattoirs are destined to disappear as part of a modernisation policy that has been in hand for over twenty years and that aims to reduce the number of abattoirs while increasing their size. Meanwhile, until the policy has been fully implemented, as figure 2 indicates the mean volume of the region's abattoirs (approximately 3,080 tonnes a year) is not in itself significant in that seventeen abattoirs out of twenty-seven have a capacity well below that average.

It goes without saying that such disparities in abattoir capacity mean enormous variations in the equipment at their disposal, in the working conditions and levels of skill of the slaughtermen, and in the spirit and atmosphere of the workplace.

These disparities affect the rhythm of work. If the larger abattoirs are able to keep up an hourly rate of 25–30 large bovines, 90–100 calves, 80–100 pigs, 120–140 sheep, and 350–400 lambs, it is impossible to assess hourly rates for an abattoir handling fewer than 2,800 metric tons a year.

Finally, the number of slaughterers (as of staff in general) depends on the capacity of the abattoir and may vary between thirty and two. They are nearly all men. Women are found in tripe-dressing rooms, in hygiene control, and of course in the offices, but I came across only two women currently employed on a slaughter line, and even they were assigned to dehairing and 'finishing' pig carcasses.

The status of slaughterers also varies greatly. Four main categories are distinguishable:

municipal contract slaughterers,

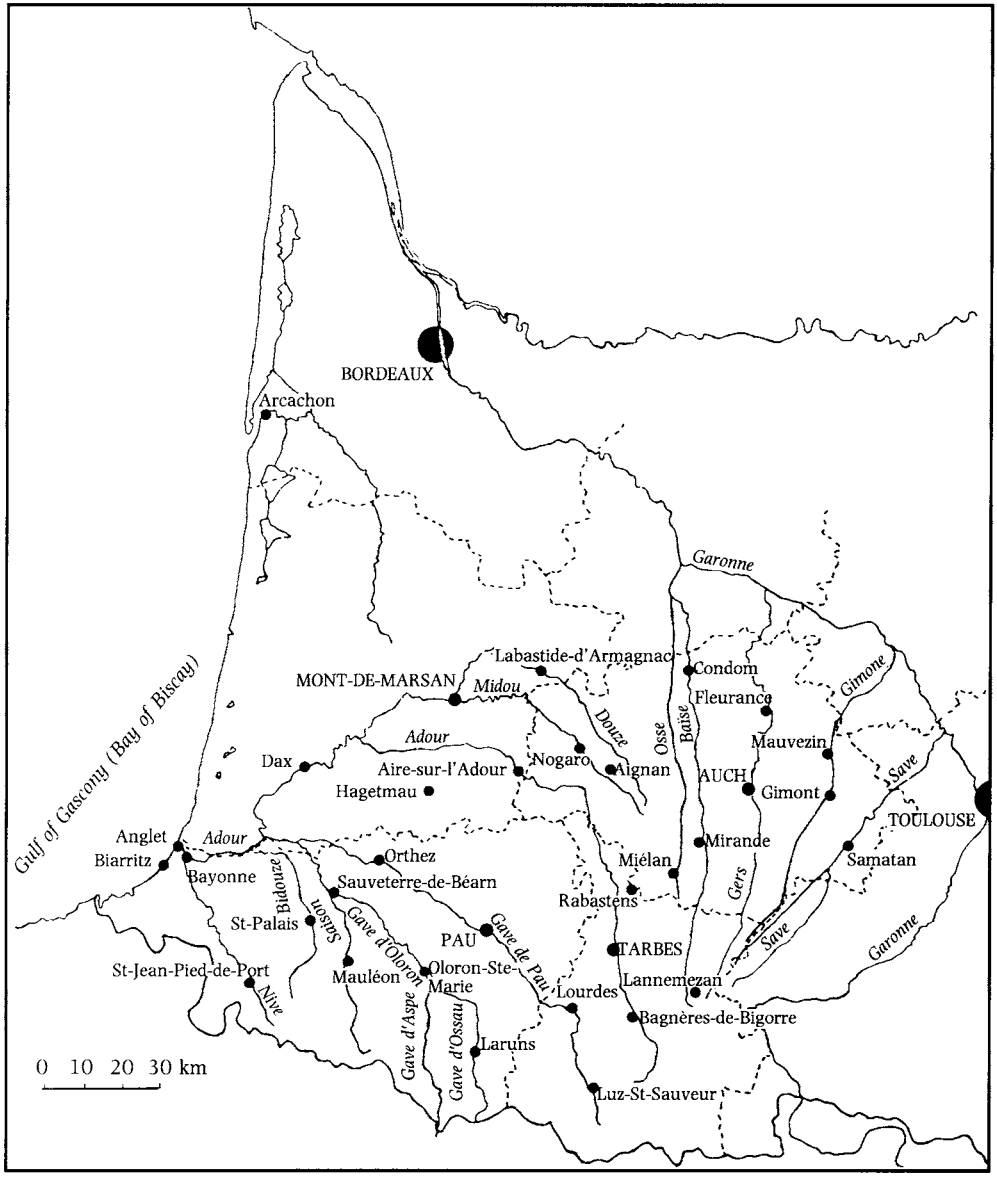
employees of craftsman slaughterers, wholesale butchers, or private firms,

craftsmen working alone or, more usually, with a small team of employees,

and lastly butchers who do their own slaughtering of the meat they sell; like the craftsmen slaughterers, they usually employ their own teams.

These status differences find very clear expression in relations among the men or between them and the various authorities (management, hygiene inspectors, wholesale butchers), so much so, in fact, that one glance into a slaughterhall was almost sufficient to determine the status of every occupant.

Work invariably began very early, around 6 a.m. but sometimes as early as 4 a.m. Probably this should be seen as a survival of old habits (in the days before refrigeration, the preparation of meat was done during the coolest hours of the day. Sometimes the other end of the day was used and butchers demanded late work, keeping slaughterers on the job until far into the night.



3 Map showing abattoirs in the Adour region

That no longer happens, and work usually stops around 2 or 4 p.m. Knocking-off time fluctuates, in fact, according to the days of the week and the seasons of the year. The busiest days are usually Monday and Thursday or Friday; the busiest times of year are more variable, depending on the

species being slaughtered (notably calves and sheep) and the quantities to be dealt with. All other things being equal, in a tourist region, for example, slaughtering will see a busy period in the summer.

The organisation of slaughtering depends on the premises and plant available and may differ widely from one establishment to another. Generally speaking, however, pigs are slaughtered in a part of the premises more or less clearly separated from the other slaughter lines and at the beginning of the day. The slaughter of large bovines or calves goes on at the same time, and finally it is the turn of the ovines [sheep]. This order may be changed, however, particularly if a very much larger quantity of one species is to be slaughtered than of other species, in which case that species will tend to be dealt with first.

However the work is organised, there is a break around 8 or 10 a.m. during which the slaughterers have something to eat. Occasionally they may prepare a proper hot meal, but often they must be content with a quick snack.

In every case it was during actual work that contact was most easily made, because the conversation mostly concerned the job itself, and on the job it is possible for a certain skill and with it a certain dignity to become manifest, qualities that are often denied to '*tueurs*' (as they call themselves). The initial contact once established, one could then continue the interview outside working hours, going back over what had been merely alluded to, discussing photographs, and, when projection facilities were available, screening and discussing Georges Franju's vivid short film, *Le sang des bêtes* (1947; released in the UK as 'The Slaughterhouse' in 1949).

Observations and conversations were not equally fruitful and convenient on every site and with every person approached, which is why certain abattoirs and certain interviewees were 'picked out' or rather stood out from the rest. In fact, an initial exploratory tour of the abattoirs of the region under consideration soon revealed that some were exemplary in terms of layout, plant, and operation; it also provided an opportunity for opening relations with certain persons that the subsequent course of the study was devoted to developing. So the present work does not in any way claim to be exhaustive, nor could it possibly be seen as such. All it seeks to do is to use some of the material gathered in an attempt to perceive the essence of the field defined by our leading question: what is meat, specifically 'butcher's meat'?