

Cow Terrorism

by Mathieu Ferry

The sacredness of the cow and the religious proscription against the consumption of beef were invented as late as the medieval period, and have since represented powerful unifying forces among the Hindu community. Today, the wave of lynchings the country has experienced shows how these notions continue to be instrumentalized by the nationalist extreme right.

Since 2010, at least 63 lynchings, provoking 28 deaths related to ‘cow terrorism’, have been mentioned in the Indian English language press.¹ These attacks are committed by ‘Gau Rakshaks’, groups dedicated to protecting the sacred cow, and they specifically target segments of the population believed to consume beef. 51 % of the lynchings involved the Muslim minority and 8 % the Dalits (the lowest castes, considered untouchable), and in 21 % of cases, the victims’ caste and religion are unknown. How do we understand the emergence of this violence in the sub-continent? What social and political tensions do these attacks reveal?

The origins of a dietary taboo

When referring to the sacred nature of the cow, the Hindus call it ‘Gau mata’ or mother cow and, as such, it is the object of a dietary taboo related to ritual purity. But this has not always been the case. In *The Myth of the Holy Cow* (2009), the historian D. N. Jha recalls that the nomadic peoples who settled in India during the 2nd millennium BE, and founded the Brahmanical culture we call Hinduism today, did not consider the cow a sacred animal. At the time they ate its meat and used it in ritual sacrifices. Although animal sacrifice is

¹ This data was collected by the [site Indiaspend](#) in June 2017.

rejected in the Vedic texts (dating from between the 15th and 5th centuries BC) the consumption of cows was not considered a sin at the time.

It was during the first centuries of our era that the consumption of beef became the object of a religious prohibition, for the upper castes, the Brahmins, to start with, and it later spread to the lower castes. The cow became an object of devotion for sedentary populations at a time when they enhanced its economic value by using it for dairy produce, and as a beast of labour in agricultural work. This materialistic dimension does not, however, suffice to explain the sacred status attributed to the cow today.

For Ambedkar (1948), the Dalit leader and social theorist, this sacredness took shape during the struggle for Brahmin supremacy over Buddhism, the religion dominant in the Indian sub-continent from Ashoka's reign until the 3rd century before our era. This theory sees the imposition of the dietary prohibition against consuming beef, and the adoption of vegetarianism, as a means for the Brahmins to seem more virtuous than the Buddhists. This explanation is similar to that suggested by Weber (1965) in *The Religion of India: the Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism*, when he describes Brahmanism's competition with other 'doctrines of salvation' like Buddhism and Jainism. The restoration of the dominance of Hinduism is linked to an overstatement of asceticism and restrictions in daily life, with an aim to attaining salvation. At a later date, Ambedkar also associates the source of untouchability with the fact of eating beef. The untouchables would thus originally be 'broken men', Buddhists vanquished in tribal conflicts, who refused to convert to Brahmanism, particularly by giving up the consumption of beef.

These historical theories are coherent with Durkheim's definition of religion, based on a division of the world into the sacred and the profane. The sacredness of the cow thus allows the Brahmins to distinguish themselves and to oppose the profane beef-eaters. Ambedkar's theory can also be compared to Mary Douglas's (1966) work, in which she suggests that dietary prohibitions contribute to preserving the social order. Hindu cultural domination is thus based on a symbolic system where defilement, here the consumption of beef, threatens the Hindu cultural order. The sacredness of the cow thus distinguishes the Hindus from other communities in the sub-continent.

Nationalism, between protecting cows and stigmatising minorities

In the 19th century, Hindu nationalist resistance movements fighting the British Empire used the cow as a key symbol in the construction of the national imagination. This was largely based on the sepoy revolt of 1857, the first popular uprising against the British.

One of the main triggers of this movement was the mutiny of the Indian soldiers, who refused to use the new cartridges greased with cow fat imposed by the colonial administration.

From the 1870s onwards a cow protection movement emerged, in Punjab to start with, and it then spread northwards and progressively to the rest of India. The first cow protection association ('Gaurakshini sabha') was established in 1882 to oppose cow slaughter. The movement was supported by the Arya Samaj, a Hindu reformist organisation created in 1875 that encouraged Hindu proselytism. The organization thus encouraged Hinduism to act 'defensively' and sought to preserve the Hindu community that it believed was threatened by the influence of Islam in the sub-continent, and the missionaries' efforts to spread belief in Christianity.²

The sacred cow is hence one of the rare symbols shared by all Hindus, and became a unifying symbol to promote Hinduism as a cultural identity. Thus, by mobilising the idea of the sacred cow, the Hindu nationalist movements sought to assert Hindu culture as the national culture, while stigmatising the beef-eaters. The latter indeed belong to religious minorities, particularly the Muslim minority. While the use of the sacred cow reinforces the Hindu nationalist myth, it is also linked to an anti-Muslim sentiment. In Hindu nationalism, the protection of cows unites the Hindus while simultaneously singling out the Muslims who slaughter them. The symbol of the sacred cow promotes inter-community riots between Hindus and Muslims, one of the most important being that of 1893 on the eve of a Muslim religious festival 'Bakri-id', during which animals are sacrificed.

The cow protection movement is politically close to the Hindu nationalists and the extremist nationalist ideology known as 'Hindutva', represented amongst others by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), created in 1925. But several members of the Congress party that dominated the political field at the time also support this movement. This is, in particular, true of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, the most influential Indian political figure from 1915 onwards. After a short period during which he defended meat eating to support the Indians in their struggle against the colonial empire, he also made vegetarianism a feature of the freedom struggle.³

In independent India, the cow protection movement made use of the legislative tool. In 1955, Seth Govind Das, a member of the lower house of the Indian Parliament proposed a first law banning cow slaughter throughout the country. The Prime Minister at the time, Jawarhalal Nehru, opposed this law. In 1966, a network of Hindu organizations led a demonstration in Delhi demanding the banning of cow slaughter, but Indira Gandhi, who

² OJHA C.C., GABORIEAU M., 1994, 'La Montée du prosélytisme dans le sous continent indien: Introduction/ The Rise of Proselytism in the Indian Sub Continent. An Introduction', *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, 87, 1, pp. 13-33.

³ KLEIN J.A., 2008, 'Afterword: Comparing Vegetarianisms', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 31, 1, pp. 199-212.

had meanwhile become Prime Minister, opposed this demand.⁴ The 1950 Constitution also explicitly stated that the prohibition against slaughtering “cows and calves and other milk producing animals” was under State and not federal jurisdiction.

In this spirit, the States of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh banned cow slaughter in the 1950s. Since then, all the Indian States, with the exception of those in the north-east, Kerala and West Bengal, have banned cow slaughter. This prohibition also applies to bulls and male and female buffaloes in certain north-western States, and in certain cases, even the possession and consumption of their meat is punishable.⁵ Nonetheless, these laws do not always ensure the absence of illegal abattoirs and a black market, tolerated by the police in exchange for bribes.

A socially marked production and consumption of beef

Whether legal or illegal, abattoirs are morally reprehensible to Hindus. This negative judgment sometimes leads to persecution, which is actually partially linked to the social origins of the butchers, mainly Muslims, from the Qureshi community (Ahmad, 2014). In addition, in the caste system, the traditional function of low castes in villages is butchering. Depending on the local configuration, this work is done by Dalits or tribal populations as H. S. Shekhar recounts in a description of village organisation in Jharkhand (State in east India):

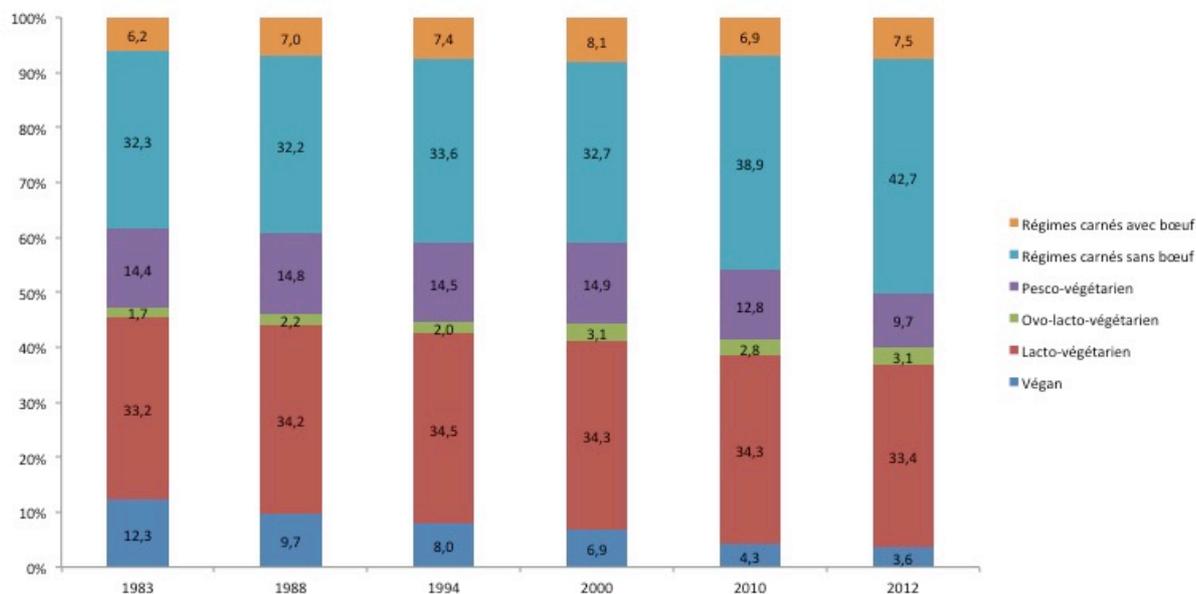
The Santhals [Adivasi caste] do not just dump the dead cattle at the bhagar [the place where carcasses are stored]. They use whatever can be used of the dead animal. The skin is used for making drums and other objects. If the carcass is fresh, the flesh is cut away to be eaten as food, especially the flesh from the rump of the cattle. Those with a taste for the entrails take those away as well. The rest of the carcass is left for the sokun, the vultures.

At the same time, Indian society is also described as affected by food ‘modernisation’ and ‘globalisation’ processes that are likely to abolish these traditional roles and lead to a higher consumption of meat, including beef (Pingali and Khwaja, 2004). Nonetheless, a close examination of household budgets limits this view. While, between the beginning of the 1980s and 2012, the proportion of households consuming meat increased by 10 points (rising from 32,3 % to 42,7 %), the proportion of households that declared they consumed beef remained stable, at between 6,2 % and 7,5 % (Figure).

⁴ A 1966 archive of the newspaper *The Hindu* is available at [this address](#).

⁵ Follow this link for an [interactive map of the prohibitions](#).

Figure - Distribution of dietary regimes among the Indian population from 1983 to 2012



Note: the dietary regimes are built on the basis of the presence of different dietary products (meat, fish, eggs, dairy products) in the household consumption basket.

Source: 'Consumer Expenditure' from the National Sample Survey Office, data between 1983 and 2012.

Geographical differences are however important: the States that did not impose a ban on cow slaughter are those where beef consumption is the highest (Kerala, West Bengal and the north-eastern States) and it does not represent a strong factor of social division.

In addition, we note a weak but positive correlation between meat consumption and the level of wealth, but this is not confirmed in the case of beef, traditionally consumed by poor households, as it is a cheap source of protein. The distribution of meat eaters across the population is not uniformly based on religion and caste either, particularly with regard to beef. While only 0,6 % of middle and upper caste⁶ Hindu households consume beef, this proportion rises to 4,2 % among the Dalits, 26,5 % for Christians and 42 % for Muslims. Hence beef remains clearly marked as a meat for the poor, the Dalits and religious minorities, with the exception of a few metropolitan centres where it is consumed outside the household by the upper classes, and may represent a sign of modernity (Dolphijn, 2006).

The consumption of beef is associated with a low social status in the Hindu caste hierarchy, to the extent that when low castes seek to achieve upward social mobility they cease

⁶ The data from the National Sample Survey Office allows a segmentation of the households into Scheduled Tribes (Adivasis), Scheduled Castes (Dalits), and others, which we will call mid-level and upper castes here.

to eat beef. This can be understood in the context of what Srinivas (1952) called Sanskritization, or the strategy of upward social mobility through the adoption of cultural practices (including dietary practices) specific to the highest castes in the hierarchy of ritual purity, and not only an improvement in socio-economic status. This may be one of the reasons for the decrease in the share of consumers amongst the Dalits since 1983, dropping from 6,8 % to 4,2 % (while it increased from 34,2 % to 42 % for Muslims during the same period). The vegetarian dietary model of the upper castes hence seems to be the dominant cultural reference.

This cultural domination, nonetheless also encourages a dietary resistance, through the organization of 'beef fests'. Kerala, a State with a Communist majority, opened its Parliamentary session on 8 June 2017 with a 'beef fry' breakfast. At IIT Madras, one of the most prestigious engineering schools in the country, the Dalit Student Association also organized a meal in July that divided the campus, with one participant being physically attacked. Although it is a source of tension, beef is no less a means for marginal groups to construct and affirm their identity in opposition to the dominant Hindu ideology. Beef also serves to demonstrate a counter-cultural project.

The Hindu nationalists, between moderation and political radicalism

Some States controlled by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), like Gujarat, Haryana Uttar Pradesh (in north India) have strengthened their laws against cow slaughter over the last few years. In Gujarat, cow slaughter is now punishable by death. In Haryana, prison sentences range from three to ten years, with a fine that can be as high as 1 lakh (100 000 rupees, or more than 1300 euros), and the sale of beef is banned. In Uttar Pradesh, immediately after he was elected in the spring of 2017, the new chief minister, Yogi Adityanath, had all the illegal abattoirs in the State shut down and he created an ambulance service for cows that were the victims of car accidents. In Maharashtra, controlled by the Shiv Sena, a Marathi nationalist party, a law adopted the same year also reinforces the punishment for slaughtering cows and extends the ban to include bulls.

At the federal level, Narendra Modi's 2014 electoral campaign that made him Prime Minister was marked by his condemnation of the 'Pink Revolution', which, according to him, was supported by the Congress. The term is a reference to the 'Green' and 'White Revolutions', government programmes of the 1960s and 1970s, introduced to modernise agricultural and dairy production respectively. In May 2017, the government banned the sale of cattle for slaughter at cattle markets. This law was nonetheless declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in August of the same year.

The current wave of lynching in India is taking place against this backdrop of new laws. We should note that 97 % of the attacks reported in the English language press since 2010 took place after 2014, which corresponds to the time when the BJP became the federal authority. We also note that the States with the highest number of lynchings are those controlled by the BJP, and have the most restrictive anti-beef laws. The ‘Gau Rakshaks’ have their own organisation, the Bhartiya Gau Raksha Dal (BGDR), created in 2012. Officially, this Hindu nationalist organisation only supports the creation of cow refuges (‘Gaushalas’) and is not affiliated to any political party. In reality, one can but wonder about the political and ideological proximity between the Gau Raksha Dal and the nationalist Hindu family, the ‘Sangh Parivar’.

This organization, composed of militias, in fact acts as a sub-contractor for the cultural regulation of Hindu nationalism promoted by the ‘Sangh Parivar’. While the Supreme Court advised the States they were to take severe action against the lynchings, and that the victims should be compensated, Mohan Bhagwat, the leader of the RSS, supported the Gau Rakshaks, declaring that protecting cows was a key issue and they had no reason to fear the accusations of violence. In Maharashtra, members of the BGDR are chosen to fill the positions of ‘Honorary Animal Welfare Officer’, the staff responsible for ensuring the application of the new law. In Haryana, working with the police, the Gau Rakshaks have started checking trucks on the highway between Chandigarh and New Delhi. In Uttar Pradesh, the links between the extremist organisation the Hindu Yuva Vahini, set up by Yogi Adityanath in 2002, are still as strong despite the founder’s election to the position of Chief Minister.

Christophe Jaffrelot underscores that this support for ‘vigilantism’ is part of the ‘Hindutva’ ideology that seeks to transform society from within, and wants to undermine State control over the social order. This separation of roles, between the reinforcement of laws and targeted violence, allows the State to save face, while imposing its Hindu nationalist project by terrorising minorities and polarising society.

Lynching is thus part of the ‘instrumentalist strategy’ explained by Christophe Jaffrelot (1993), or in other words, the mobilisation of one of the rare religious symbols worshipped by all Hindus for political purposes. This is a means of keeping the Hindu nationalist movement alive while creating the perception of an exogenous threat that maintains a feeling of vulnerability among a section of the Hindu majority. It is also the sign of a new phase of radicalisation of the Hindu nationalist right.⁷

⁷ Sylvie Guichard discusses this issue in her article ‘Indian Populism’ available at: <http://www.booksandideas.net/Indian-Populism.html>.

Ritual distinctions and socio-economic distinctions

The 'Gau Rakshaks' are recruited young and are often members of other Hindu organisations. One of the specificities of the lynchings, in comparison to other forms of violence implemented in the name of Hindutva, is that here, the nationalist movement does not severely or primarily affect urban categories, it also, and essentially, impacts the rural world. Although localised, the attacks have high visibility thanks to You Tube videos posted on social networks that create a climate of fear, and are as efficient as anti-Muslim pogroms, like those that took place in Gujarat in 2002.

In several lynching cases, for which we have obtained reports written by researchers, journalists, or even activists, the victims often seem to be, if not prosperous, at least relatively better off than the local average. The first lynching that was widely mediatised was the one that took place in Dadri, in Bissari village in 2015, where a crowd attacked a Muslim family during Eid, (wrongly) accusing them of wanting to eat veal. The Akhlaque family is one of the richest in the village, including in comparison to the Rajputs, the dominant local community. The father died in the attack and the son was seriously wounded (Janhastakshep, 2015). In the case of the lynching of four Dalits in Una, in July 2016, the journalist Sudipto Mondal describes the 'Dalit pride' prevalent amongst the Sarvaiya community that was targeted by the attack. In this specific case, the relative economic success of the Dalits, along with their anti-caste activism, provides the context for these attacks. Piyush, the victims' uncle states:

Our people are willing to do any work from skinning dead animals to working in the fields and driving taxis in Mumbai. The Patels and the Darbars [local dominant castes] will never do these jobs. They always hire somebody. The landlords have had a few bad years (drought in 2013 and floods in 2015). Lots of cattle died and the only people who benefited were our people. Plus, many of our boys have gone to Surat to work as laborers in the diamond-cutting industry. Many of the Sarvaiyas are doing well. The dominant castes can't stand our success.

Thus the economic frustration the local dominant castes face, in comparison to the lower castes and the Muslims, allows us to see the context in which the targets of the attacks are chosen. The lynchings sanction the improvement in their economic condition, which although relative, threatens the dominant castes' feelings of social superiority. The message sent to the victims is hence both not to eat beef, but also to remain in their place, at the bottom of the social hierarchy. This analysis also appears in the reports of crimes committed against Dalits, as can be seen in the detailed account provided by Anand Teltumbde (2010) in *The Persistence of Caste* (first published under the title *Khairlanji. A Strange and Bitter Crop*). Based on an analysis of the records of the crimes committed against Dalit and tribal minorities, Smriti Sharma (2015) showed a positive statistical correlation between violent crime and the difference in the lifestyles of low and high castes at the district level. Clearly, when the gap decreases or, in other words, when the lower castes have a better lifestyle (while remaining inferior to that of the upper castes) the crime level rises.

The demands for reserved quotas in the administration and government educational institutions made by the Patels, one of the dominant castes mentioned by Piyush, is a sign of this economic anxiety. Reservations are permitted by the positive discrimination system applicable to disadvantaged castes. Although the Patel caste has a socio-economic level clearly above that of the lower castes (Deshpande and Ramachandran, 2017), they are victims of 'neo-middle-class' syndrome, in the sense that as an 'aspirational caste', they are deeply dissatisfied with their economic situation.

The link between religious belonging, ritual status and the consumption of beef, is hence not sufficient to explain the lynchings. They are also part of a context where socio-economic aspirations upset the logic of statuses. The economic success experienced by a fraction of the religious minorities threatens the imposition of Hinduism as the dominant culture, just as the socio-economic advancement of certain members of the lower castes questions the legitimacy of the hierarchical order of caste based on ritual purity.

Questioning a political strategy

While the lynchings represent a strategy in the continuity of the Hindutva nationalist movement, we can question its ability to garner support in the mid and long-term. A response to this should be developed on the basis of both a political and economic perspective.

To start with, the nationalist movement is limited in the political field. Stigmatising minorities pushes them to react at the political level too, encouraging them to unite. The lynchings that took place in Una, in Gujarat, in July 2016 provoked a march through Gujarat in the summer of 2016. The watchword was a demand for agricultural land for Dalits, who were forced, for economic reasons, to work as slaughterers as no other resources were available to them. The movement brought together a range of Dalit figures, in particular members of the Dalit doctoral student Rohith Verma's family. This student had committed suicide at the University of Hyderabad just a few months before, provoking a student movement that denounced the educational inequalities between castes.

In addition, in the wake of the murder of the Muslim, Junaid Khan, by members of the Gau Rakshak militia, a movement developed on social media around the slogan 'Not in my name'. Khan was killed in a train while travelling to Faridabad in June 2017, his murder motivated by an accusation that he was transporting beef (it was in fact permitted buffalo meat). Demonstrations, involving students and probably a majority of people belonging to the affluent classes, were held on 28 June and 3 July 2017 in most of the major Indian cities, leading Prime Minister Narendra Modi to publicly condemn the lynchings. Indeed, the international image of the Indian leadership cannot risk being tainted by violent militia.

Undoubtedly the biggest problem this political strategy has to face is the conflict between economic reality and the Hindutva ideology. To start with, the prohibition against slaughtering cows and the lynchings have a very negative impact on the beef and leather industries, in which the Muslim community is massively over-represented. We can wonder what impact this policy has had on exports, given that the turnover of the beef industry is higher than that of basmati rice. India is the largest exporter of beef in the world, mainly to Vietnam, Malaysia and the Gulf countries that appreciate this cheap halal meat. Further, the large international textile brands have already reduced their orders in India, a country that is nonetheless the second largest supplier of shoes and leather garments in the world. The current political climate is clearly a threat to these industries that for the most part belong to the informal sector, and employ over 5 million people.⁸

But the specificity of the meat and leather industries in India is that they are largely based on the slaughter of animals that are at the end of their lives, either because they produce too little milk or are no longer useful for agricultural work. While, on average, a cow can produce milk for about 3 to 5 years, it can usually live for another 15 years. The prohibition on slaughter hence further complicates the already precarious economy of farmers, who now have either to feed unproductive animals, or abandon them, which poses its own problems on agricultural land. They can also donate them to an NGO or to the government that keeps them in 'gaushalas'. But while the government expects these unproductive animals to be supported by an industry based on 'cowpathy' - using cow dung and urine in Ayurvedic products - the therapeutic efficiency of these products and the economic viability of this enterprise is yet to be proven. From an ecological perspective, we can also question the environmental impact of keeping a population of unproductive cows alive. The last option, of course, remains selling the livestock on the black market, but this is becoming increasingly complicated with the heightened monitoring by nationalist militias.⁹

Far from resolving the agrarian crisis affecting the rural world, the nationalist strategy hence complicates the extremely difficult lives of small farmers who have little land, but nonetheless own a few livestock to complement their income. While 45 % of rural households own dairy cows, 71 % of them only own one and 21 % two. For these small livestock owners, the sale of milk allows them to earn, on average, 7 % of their total annual income.¹⁰

It is hence the security of farmers' incomes, the future of the dairy industry, and at a wider scale, Indian food security that is threatened. Elected on the basis of promises of growth that would create employment, particularly under the slogan 'Make in India', the BJP now has to face its contradictions. Between promises of employment and issues of community identity, the Indian nationalist right seems, for the time being, to have chosen ideology.

⁸ For further information on these economic issues, see the full articles by Sagari R. Ramdas in the online magazine *The Wire*: <https://thewire.in/author/sagari-r-ramdas/>.

⁹ On farmer precariousness and the effect of bans on slaughter, see the graphic account written by William de Tamaris, illustrated by Jörg Maillat, 'Sacrées Vaches', published in issue 39 of the review *XXI*.

¹⁰ Calculated on the basis of the Indian Human Development Survey II, 2011-2012.

The lynchings related to cows are hence part of a Hindu nationalist ideology and strategy that polarise a socially marked consumption and production in the political space. By seeking to impose a cultural model based on that of the dominant Hindu castes, the Indian nationalist right stigmatises lower castes and religious minorities, while running the risk of compromising the country's economic development.

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First published in laviedesidees.fr, 17 November 2017. Translated from the French by Renuka Georges with the support of the Florence Gould Foundation.

Published in *Books & Ideas*, 26 March 2018.