

How to become a Terran?

Gastro-geo-politics of the return to earth

by Harald Lemke¹

1

Usually, moral philosophy or ethics, which is my profession, does not enjoy much popularity: People are simply not interested in morality and questions about what is morally right or wrong and ethically good or bad to do. It is all the more remarkable that our world is experiencing a veritable boom in ethical thinking and acting. A number of new so called applied ethics have emerged in recent years such as bioethics, animal ethics, climate ethics, and more recently, sustainability ethics or neuroethics. What the world also desperately needs is gastroethics - or what I prefer to call „gastrosophy“.²

On the first day of our conference we discuss already the conceptual and strategic need of the right wording. I am optimistic that the term gastrosophy and a playful variation of it, like gastro-ethics, gastro-politics, gastro-culture or gastro-science and so on, offer a strong programmatic connotation and yet appeal to the everyday wisdom which is rooted in people's knowledge and scientific curiosity.

¹ Keynote Speech at the Symposium Toward the International Society for Gastronomic Sciences and Studies, University Turin, 25 September 2022. All rights reserved.

² In particular: Harald Lemke, The Ethics of Taste Principles of a Philosophy of Food or Towards a new Gastrosophy; see in general: <https://independent.academia.edu/lemkeh>

Anyway, there are many good – and bad – reasons why philosophers in particular should finally deal with our food and daily eating in order to radically rethink our relationship to the world. Who else, if not philosophers, can be expected to outline a gastrosophical world ethic that serves human survival on earth.

In their book *What is Philosophy?*, the French critics Gille Deleuze and Felix Guttari define the necessary transformation of anthropo-logo-centric philosophy toward a new down-to-earth philosophy as „reterritorialization“ of our being and thinking. My inspiration is to approach this reterritorialization gastrosophically. Because nothing connects us physically, culturally and morally more with the earth – with Terra – than our daily food and its eco-gastro-centric „worlding“ (Harraway).

I would like to use the few minutes of my presentation to discuss at least three fundamental components of a gastro-philosophy. Particularly, those which are fundamental to the founding of our „new society“ and also the ongoing „Terra Madre Salone del Gusto. Food Regeneration“ event. I like this play on words because it combines our ultimate goal – global food transformation – with a striking down-to-earth call to action.

For the first component of gastrosophy, namely the origin of the term, we have to step back into history for a second.

With the beginning of modern society at early 19th century we see the formation of a new gastronomy, which results from the emergence of commercial restaurants and a culinary art of professional chefs, as well as the emergence of modern nutritional science, physiology and agro-chemistry.

At the same time a tender offspring of gastrosophical thinking is stirring. Well-known names such as the Frenchman Brillat-Savarin, the first modern gastro critic, the German art theorist Friedrich Rumohr and above all, of course, the free-spirited thinkers Ludwig Feuerbach and Friedrich Nietzsche are beginning to address the societal importance and philosophical relevance of food: Surely you know the first principle of Feuerbach's "gastrology" as he said: „You are, what you eat“; already less common is the refined question of Nietzsche's gastronautic wisdom, „Do we know the moral impact of our nutrition? Why is there no philosophy of food whatsoever?“

But it was the utopian visionary Charles Fourier who for the first time expanded the common term of „gastronomy“ – referring to a special part of the whole – with „gastrosophy" as a newly invented concept to signify

a philosophically holistic view of all ingredients of the complex world of our food or gastro-sphere.

Contrary to Brillat-Savarin`s plea for a new „transcendental gastronomy“, Fourier himself did not elaborate a programmatic gastrosophy.³

Nevertheless, his idea of a philosophically holistic view of all components of our complex gastro-world can be inspirational in the founding process of our new society. This gastrosophical complexity is already reflected in the diversity of scientific disciplines at this conference, but it encompasses many more discourses of politics, aesthetics, economics, everyday culture, and many other essential ingredients of gastro studies.

The second essential of gastrosophy is to turn the general gastro-political and rather socio-technical sounding problem of „How to feed the world" into the everyday and down-to-earth question of response-able gastro-ethics. Namely: *“What (and how) will I eat tomorrow?, What kind of world and humanity am I feeding?”*

With this rather poetic formula, gastroethics seeks its roots in our daily lives and expects truly a very slow food-transformation.

³ See: Magali Fleurot, *Gastrosophy today: can Charles Fourier’s vision of food become a model for 21st-century food empowerment projects?*, 2017.

The third ingredient of „gastrosophy“ as a new holistic mind-set creates connections to the crucial dimension of what I name the Gastrocene. There is much talk about the „Anthropocene“ – defining Earth's most recent geologic era as being human-made or more to the point, as being anthropocentrically deformed. However, what we should think of is the Gastrocene: an era of a post-human but gastrocentric reterritorialization of our world forming.

To get there, we should use our food not only to eat, but also to create, as wisely as possible, science fiction. A utopian storytelling of a „new society" is about a down-to-earth convivialism and an adventurous becoming-with that has daily good food, culinary arts and creativity, common dining, humus composting and alike in its normative and narrative center. Such a gastrosophical story you can carry with you as “a sack full of seeds for terraforming with terrestrial others” – to quote here the biologist and science (fiction) philosopher Donna Haraway.

2

This is the keyword for me to now-here sow the idea of „terra madre regener-acting“.

Most of what we eat is growing from fertile soil in which all plants are rooted. Once you start reflecting this basic fact, it is quite easy to understand the importance of fruitful, food-producing soils. Without it, there would be nothing to eat for nobody and ultimately no terrestrial life at all.

Resulting from the slow rotting – eating and digesting we might say – of organic matter, fertile soil or **humus** is this dark brown, dirty, crumbly, loose composition of invisible underground societies and substances which supplies plants with all nutrients they need to grow and prosper. Those nutrients are in every potato, every loaf of bread, every grain of rice and almost every dish we consume. All natural nutrients depend on a magic cooperation among billions of microbial co-inhabitants and other-than-human living beings: Eating and digesting grass clippings, leaf compost, wood chips, decayed sawdust, garden and kitchen waste, or any other types of dead organic bodies – that is to say, all humic agents serve as tasty food for the planet's plants we eat.

Vital soil (nurturing nature) that serves humans as fundamental resource for their agricultural food production, is commonly referred to as „earth". May be surprisingly, but this earth is the essence from which our planet takes its name. Although being the most essential for all terrestrial life on

our „Earth“, this humic (fertile, healthy, good) earth is for the majority of us literally a **terra incognita** — an unknown world, a never-thought-of „new society“. ⁴

Perhaps, therefore, gastrosophical consciousness (or con-sciences) sow new concepts and words that nourish our gastroethical potentials and powers and the "possibility of planetary survival" (Haraway). The anthropologist and philosopher Bruno Latour places the geo-political challenge of "earthing ourselves" at the centre of his recently published „terrestrial manifesto“. Ultimately, a philosophic and poetic „reterritorialization“ or regeneration of our essential connection to the planet Earth should address fertile soils, the food-serving earths as „terra madre“ in small letters, grounded in a down-to-earth life philosophy.

Although terra madre is the essence from which our planet takes its name, most of the Earth is not vital and food-productive earth but is made out of rock and sand, or more and more of streets, buildings and parking lots. Imagine that less than 10% of the planetary territories and farmlands provide the agricultural soil on which we depend for the

⁴ So we see: As the naming of planet „Earth“ (Geo) originates from the nourishing earth, so we can and should speak of the terra madre (gastro) in a gastrosophical way, to give all the theoretical talking of Mother Earth -- Gaia, Madre Terra, Pascha Mama, Mutter Erde -- the everyday practical sense of a down to earth philosophy.

world's food supply. The origin of almost all living beings, including you and me, is the thin dirty skin of Earth's surface, only a few inches deep beneath our feet. Consider also, that nature left to itself needs a thousand years for just one centimeter of **terra madre to form**.

For hundreds of thousands of years our species has lived on the unconditional gift of healthy earths. This is especially true since the invention of anthropogenic land cultivation – since most of our daily food grows from agricultural terraforming. But as a ready-made fossil nutrition resource, terra madre has evolved – literally as slow food – over millions of years from the sustainable cycle of life and death of all other-than-human earthlings.

However, since the very beginning of human's terraforming, agricultural food production happened as a systematic exploitation, a one-sided taking and extracting from age-old humus without giving much nourishing back to earth. Such a one-sided, unsustainable consumption of fossil resources goes well until the available arable land is depleted or at least crop yields gradually decrease due to declining soil fertility.

In the more recent past of our history, such signs first appeared at the beginning of the 19th century. At that time, the British population theorist

Thomas Malthus predicted an impending food shortage. However, as we know, revolutionary hunger riots did not occur, instead the so called Green revolution did. The invention of modern agro-chemistry and the industrialization of mono-agricultural food production only solved the world hunger problem technologically and temporarily. And it doesn't look like humanity will find another similar purely agricultural solution to feed the world with many more people in the future — five times as many people as in Malthus' time.

The intensive use of newly invented synthetic fertilizers and the mechanization of agriculture by large machines have so far made it possible to increase global crop yields many times over and produce cheap food in abundance. However, for the last 200 years the food supply that feeds a rapidly growing world population has come less and less from the earth and more and more from the international fertilizer industry and ultimately from fossil oil in earthy soil.

Artificial fertilizers function really like fast food for farm crops: They make them fast full and fat, but simultaneously all the other co-inhabitants of terra madre get nothing to eat. They gradually starve to death. Many of the globe's terra madre are now in crisis — degraded and eroding. Instead to increase the average thickness of fertile topsoils, instead to

prepare good food for terrestrial others, dominant agro-business with its use of fast food fertilizers and aggressive tilling technologies diminish our common ground of living.

As one of many similar documents of the United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organization stated: *„The main problem humanity is currently facing is not global warming, extinction of species or any other environmental crisis – the main problem we will have to face is the degradation of our soils. The world population continues to increase while we destroy more and more topsoil. If this is allowed to continue there won't be enough fertile soil left to feed a growing world population.“*⁵

We have taken earth for granted and now one-third of the world's arable lands are already depleted. The equivalent of 30 football pitches of earth get lost to extinction every minute.

Do you know that the global soils still contain about 1,500 billion tons of organic carbon, that's approximately twice the amount of carbon in the atmosphere? If the earth is exposed to erosion, the planet breathe out million tons of carbon every single day and thus contributes significantly to heating the planet and its destructive effects. (Apart from further

⁵ Cited in: Veronika Bond, Humus. The black gold of the earth, 2018.

climate and environmental destruction caused by the prevailing agriculture.)

To finally learn more about our common ground we will discover terra madre to be the biggest ecosystem of our planet: Humic earths harbor a quarter of the biodiversity of the global ecology. A handful of nutrient-rich soil is a teeming playground for up to 10 billion microorganisms and as yet undiscovered species! That's more than the number of people living on the planet. It's this microbial powerhouse and its complex diversity which makes terra madre the greatest carbon sink we have, one of the best regulators of global climate, the largest natural water reservoir and a treasure trove of irreplaceable life forms.

3

If there shall be a human survival and well-being on Earth, then the world is in need of an inspiring story about the „precious dirt under our feet“. If we really wanted to achieve goals of a „Sustainable Development“, then we really should goal a utopian narrative of „how to transform humans into Terrans?“.

We, who are gathered here and all those who have already found their access into the gastro-matrix, know that terra madre regeneration

requires nothing more than farming or gardening practices that work in ecological harmony with the earth. Therefore, what can to be done ethically for this „earthing“ is rather down to earth and really a „grass-root“ movement entering every day the Gastrocene.

I know, there are varies ways of narrating a utopian earth and caring for the humification process in soil. But in any case, what you certainly need is simple organic fertilizer like compost, manure, biomass, crop rotation, and cover crops. And make sure the ground is permanently covered. All of this prevents arable land from losing nutrients and forms terra madre anew. Those earthy things serve as crucial transformative agents to sustainable low-input food production, worldwide.

What contributes most to the regeneration of soil fertility and its food producing potential is to make friends with earthworms. Earthworms are a real hero of humic earth. Just by eating, their earthing offers many benefits – from increased nutrient availability and better drainage, to creating a crumble and humid terra. Out of admiration for these heroes of terra madre forming we might even think of replacing the Slow Food snail with an earthworm.

To put it in one word, I like to propose telling this kind of utopian story:

*We humans, born out of humus and nourished by terra madre every single day, are going to rescue the earth by becoming com-post-humans and each of us (re-)turning into a Terran – whether that means supporting the terra madre regenerators **among us** today or allowing the Terran **within us all** – to counter our trans-post-human earth escaping tendencies.*

Allowing the rediscovery of the com-post-human Terran in us and to act like a terra madre earthling in daily live, however, does not mean that people have to become full-time peasants all over again. There exists no reason what so ever for repeating the tragic history of a peasant humanity that had to experience agricultural food production only as hard work and inhuman burden.

The first steps toward the near future of a terrestrial lifestyle are presently being taken in many places. An increasing and maybe critical mass of us humans is getting closer to the utopian life of Terrans. They all – and likely not few of you including myself – already experiment with an earthy lifestyle whose daily routines and pleasures comprise a few hours of agricultural work – farming, gardening, earthing – which makes life more sovereign, more food-secure, more resilient, more social, more

just, and joyful. And of course, as I pointed out, more ethically correct in terms of sustainability, climate neutrality, biodiversity and humanity's utopian survival.

So, we should take it as encouraging news from a better future that millions of people, especially in the poorer countries of the South, are already living according to this way of daily self-sufficiency. Therefore, a symbolic campaign to plant 10,000 food gardens across an entire continent – as the Slow Food initiative in Africa strives for – does not go far enough.

Only if all know that this has to take place on every piece of land and suitable territory in rural surroundings, only if on every corner in the cities and neighborhoods - only if millions and billions of terra madre regenerating activities are created all over the earth, our world is transforming – maybe returning – into a real paradise garden where good food can grow and the art of a common good living is reality.

Finally, I would like to take up to Bruno Latour's „Terrestrial Manifesto“ once again, which calls for founding of a new international „Party of the Terrans“. As a matter of fact, we occasionally see the formation—and failure—of new political Parties. But I seriously wonder who else would

become an earthly Party if not the Slow Food movement. Perhaps it is time that, after its worldwide dissemination, to blossom its local convivia and communities, its national organizations and its global network into a gastro-geo-political Party!

In the young, wild phase of her initiation, Carlo Petrini called for the establishment of a gastronomic "International of Good Taste". The task for the future then should be, I think, to make this Good Taste electable in all democratic societies and territories as „the Earth's Party" or the one and lonely „Terra Madre Party“. Once in political power in many countries of the globe, their governments should do everything necessary for supporting our daily self-transformation of humans into Terrans. — Unfortunately, this promising political option does not yet exist, especially on this day when Italy elects a new government. But why not next time!

My part to contribute to this possible change is trying to come up with inspiring philosophy, namely „gastrosophy“ that tells a utopian story about the earth and daily terra madre regeneracting.

A telling story that makes the earthworm the hero; that makes you dig in dirt; that teaches us of our conviviality with subterranean microbial

companions and co-eaters; that narrates about the fine taste of terroir in our wines and meals; that imagines the beauty of the Earth and its landscapes rich of lush soil. All this is inspired by the philosophical wisdom („sophia“) of a scientific „gastro“ thinking that studies holistically all components of the complex world of our daily food and our common ground.⁶

⁶ Harald Lemke, Food Citizenship. Civilizing Future Humanity, in: Integrated Human Sciences Program for Cultural Diversity, Todai University Tokyo, 2017, 1-20 (https://www.haraldlemke.de/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Lemke_Food_Citizenship.pdf)