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Shopping for Meaning: Tracing the Ontologies of Food Consumption in Latvia

Anne Sauka

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Introduction

Researchers of different calibres from phenomenology to posthumanism and beyond have outlined the processuality of the body and the environment (Alaimo 2010; Gendlin 2017), stressing the importance of changing the ontological presuppositions of the body-environment bond (Schoeller and Duanetz 2018: 131), since the existing models facilitate the alienation and intangibility of the environment, thus, leading to reduced societal awareness of the importance of environmental issues (Neimanis, Åsberg, Hedrén 2015: 73–74). In this article, I argue that in questions relating to food, product-oriented ideologies dominate over process-oriented ethicality, in part, due to an embodied and lived ideology that can be best described via the concept of reactive nihilism and substance ontology. The article aims to demonstrate a necessity to rethink and recontextualize situated practices as alternatives to the prevalent ontogenealogies¹ of the Global North. By problematizing the complimentary axis of *reactive nihilism* in food contexts and the genealogy of contemporary pop food “ethics”, I argue for a shift away from product-oriented ideologies and supplementation of the ontologies-we-live-by with situated alternative models.

- 1 The notion of “ontogenealogies” refers to the combination of the notions of “ontology” and “genealogy” that I use as the framework of my research. It refers to a life understood as senseful materiality in a nature-culture continuum as genealogical and acknowledges the ingraining and co-constitution of materialities via genealogies and ontologies, where genealogy represents the vertical axis of becoming, while the related ontologies represent the horizon of understanding. While genealogies co-constitute senseful materialities, they do not exhaust or essentialize this sphere, allowing a nexus of ontogenealogies. The theoretical framework of the ontological character of genealogy is discussed further in my recent article (Sauka 2020a), in context with Philipp Sarasin’s consideration of Michel Foucault and Charles Darwin as genealogists that surpass the spheres of biologization and poststructuralism and demonstrate the discontinuity of the bio-(il) logical and the often-rigid stability of the cultural codes (Sarasin 2009). In the further text, I refer to “ontologies” when I denote the horizon of understanding as if uprooted from the vertical axis of genealogies, and I say “genealogy” to stress the vertical realization. An ontogenealogical approach is a tool that allows taking into account both authors that refer to social constructs and those that focus on the material embeddedness of lived experiences. The conceptualization of life as fundamentally processual and pluralist and, thus, ontogenealogical via a biophilosophical standpoint (Thacker 2008; Radomska 2016), however, grounds the possibility of such a conceptualization.

Thus, I employ a new materialist approach² that highlights the processuality and entanglement of life and argues that ontologies and ideologies are part of a socio-material experience. This view presumes that since the seemingly cultural phenomena (for example, the concepts pertaining to the understanding of the body) have material and lived consequences, it is especially crucial to rethink and reconfigure predominant ontological presuppositions in the face of the climate crisis and the sixth extinction.³

I explore food-related practices in context with the ontologies that frame the societal perception of food consumption today, arguing for building greater awareness of situated (in this case, Latvian) ontogenealogies in thinking about food ethics and environmental ethics for tomorrow. The scope of this problem is rather broad, and, thus, I limit my interest to the aspects that prove significant to everyday experience contexts, discussing the attitudes and praxis that stem from a larger socio-political and existential context.

A consideration of the lived experiences with regard to ethics is, hence, significant both as a way to problematize the predominant genealogies of the body-environment bond and as a way to construct the possible paths forward to facilitate the societal engagement in questions relating to food ethics. In this article, I understand ethics as a phenomenon, embedded in the ontogenealogical nexus of the sociopolitical sphere, arising, and developing with the meanings, praxes, and attitudes of the lived materialities, in the context of what Tom Hertweck calls “embodied ideologies” (2018).

Although ethics does not coincide with the field of ontologies-we-live-by (Radomska 2016: 75–76), I seek to show that a shift in ontologies is needed to promote new connectivity of

- 2 A feasible definition of the most crucial aspects of new materialism is provided by Susan Yi Sencindiver “Seeking to move beyond the constructivist-essentialist impasse, new materialism assumes a theoretical position that deems the polarized positions of a postmodernist constructivism and positivist scientific materialism as untenable; instead, it endeavors to account for, in Baradian idiom, the co-constitutive “intra-actions” between meaning and matter, which leave neither materiality nor ideality intact.” (Sencindiver 2017). It is, thus, a move away from essentialism not by discarding nature, biology, and materiality, but, instead, by radically rethinking the sphere of the material and biological as transformative, processual, and sense-ful based on a nature-culture continuum (Alaimo 2008: 242 – 250). I here follow mostly the works that could be accounted for as feminist materialism or the material turn in feminist theory, a strand of new materialism that highlights a processual and transformative understanding of materiality (Alaimo 2008). For further discussion of various feminist materialisms see Alaimo and Hekman, 2008. For further discussion of new materialism, see Coole and Frost 2010.
- 3 The analysis of situated practices is based upon a broader framework of ontogenealogical embeddedness in materiality. If one accepts that ontologies are connected with the materialities, a shift in the ontological presuppositions such as the shift presumed by postanthropocentric authors seems to be imaginable only there, where alternative models are already existing; a completely novel ontology seems unable to root itself in material experience (except if the experience itself radically changes). Thus, a premise of life as ontogenealogical allows conceptualizing experienced changes in ontologies, as well as genealogical transformations and understanding them in the context of a material lifeworld. Thus, the investigation of the ontogenealogies in existence allows searching for alternatives to the predominant models and to consider materiality as co-constituted by the prevalent ontogenealogies.

the body and the environment on an affectual level, and, hence, approaches in ethics should also be informed by ontogenealogical investigation. Thus, I am not interested in any particular moral philosophies *per se*, but their embeddedness in prevailing ontologies. Therefore, I do not take any food ethics at “face value” but rather address the factors that sustain existing nutritional lifestyle choices, critically examining the ontological presuppositions that frame the existing praxes and attitudes.

In the first part of the article, I use a genealogical approach, tracing the predominant meaning cluster encapsulated in Feuerbach’s famous expression “Man is what he eats” (Feuerbach 1846-1866, X: 5) in today’s contexts. To illustrate the leading discourses, I follow a Deleuzian understanding of the concept of “reactive nihilism” and contextualize food choices with the dominant understanding of the body in the Global North. With this discussion, I hope to provide context for the need to reconsider local ontologies as knowledge resources for the future.

In the second part of the article, the framework present in the Global North is then complemented by a discussion of some local factors, to suggest ways in which global food philosophy and, particularly, lifestyle choices of food consumption could benefit from acknowledging the knowledge embedded in food consumption trends in Latvia. Here I argue in line with researchers who highlight the need to consider Latvian and Baltic food cultures and politics as a viable source of knowledge for sustainable food practices in the future (see Jehlička et al. 2020; Mincytė, and Plath 2015; 2017), highlighting the consumer position in the discussions. As a post-Soviet European country with a rich and diverse food culture, access to high-quality products, and a history of wild food foraging, non-monetary food exchange, and domestic gardening culture, Latvia provides fruitful ground for considering alternatives to the prevailing trends of the Global North for thinking of food consumption ethically.

1. Food, Choice, and Guilt

Let me start with the seminal phrase of Ludwig Feuerbach: “Man is what he eats”⁴. Today this phrase has become well-known in a modified form “you are what you eat”⁵ and is even regarded

4 “Der Mensch ist was er isst” (Feuerbach 1846-1866, X: 5).

5 For a further critique of the contemporary popular understanding of this phrase, as well as a brief history of the changing meanings of its usage, facilitated also by the publication of Victor H. Lindlahr’s book *You Are are What what You Eat* in 1940 (Linlahr 1940), see Landecker 2015. Lindlahr is one of the most prominent figures, introducing a direct link between eating and being: “what you eat for breakfast, lunch and dinner is converted into your hair, eyes, nose, mouth, lungs, fingernails, and the many, many other tissues of which your body is composed. This changing of foodstuffs into flesh and bones and blood, this impregnation of life into particles of lifeless matter, is no simple business. A process which can change a fruit cup, a lamb chop, and a dessert into you, into living body cells, is surely miraculous” (Lindlahr, 1942: 7, cited in Landecker 2015).

as cliché for advertising healthy or *stylish* foods and bringing attention to new and trendy lifestyles that might just change your lives by 180, or, more likely, 360 degrees, and then vanish as fast they arrived.⁶ These are the kinds of “pop food philosophies” that have formed today (and together with other “lifestyle philosophies” which allow for dismissing philosophical inquiry).⁷

When Feuerbach coined this phrase in his review of the Dutch-Italian physiologist’s Jakob Moleschott’s *Lehre der Nahrungsmittel* (Moleschott 1950; Chernov 1963: 399) it was not used in the sense in which we are used to seeing it today. Instead, it referred to the a) interaction of food and humans, i.e., the fact that the substances found in food are also present in humans and *vice versa*; and b) financial inequality. Thus, Feuerbach states that: “Nothingness in the stomach—a very real, because perceptible, Nothingness” (Grün 1874: 86, cited in Chernov 1963: 401) and:

Food becomes blood; blood becomes heart and brain, food for thoughts and feelings. Human food is the foundation of human development and feeling. If you want to improve the people, give them better food instead of declamations against sin (Grün 1874: 90, cited in Chernov 1963: 401).

These quotations highlight the social necessity for questioning human relationships with food, demonstrating the impact of material resources on the potential for leading a dignified life. This social aspect of *becoming food* does not, of course, exclude material embeddedness. On the contrary, Feuerbach’s exclamation emphasizes the entanglement of lived materialities, societal issues, and ethics, and invites questioning—how does the distribution of food co-constitute the lived materialities of human bodies?⁸ That is, however, far from the network of meanings in which the phrase seems to be embedded today.

Ironically, Feuerbach’s ideas can be explored as a critique of the contemporary meaning of the phrase “man is what he eats”. Nowadays, widely used in media to advertise healthy eating as a lifestyle and the key to overall wellness and fitness, the phrase is used as an introductory rhetorical element for various “food philosophies,” namely, different collections of

- 6 To avoid misunderstanding, I should note that I do not presume that the statement here is the origin of human relations with food today. Rather, it manifests as a prominent element in food philosophies, and thus functions as their facilitator, which is why it can be analyzed in context with the reactive nihilism that it represents. A critical genealogy necessitates some sort of an anchor that I here find in the phrase “you are what you eat”—hoping that by analyzing the meanings conveyed by this phrase, it might be possible to unearth parts of the structure of meaning it conceals. To note the popularity of the phrase—when written in Google, “you are what you eat” shows 1,730,000,000 results.
- 7 The advent and proliferation of lifestyle philosophies, in context with the downfall of human sciences, and the ironic demand for pop philosophy and the simultaneous reprimand of serious philosophical inquiry would need a separate study but could also be analyzed via Deleuze’s concept of reactive nihilism, considered later in the article (Deleuze 2006: 148–151).
- 8 In context with the latest developments in evolutionary theory and epigenetics (Jablonka and Lamb 2014), the social inequalities might also be said to ingrain and transform materialities along the genealogical axis of genetic inheritance.

normative advice on how to become a better, more effective, super-human⁹ self, and goes hand-in-hand with the popularization of a moral imperative “to eat well,” which often means high-end, expensive food products, inaccessible to a broader society.

Simplistically understood (outside of the romantic and esoteric undertones) the phrase conveys the message “people are as good as the food they eat” (on linking health and pleasure, Mol 2009: 271–273). Doubtless, a great steak uplifts my spirits; however, does good food make a good person? Nowadays, by linking food and civic/environmental duty, the scope of meaning for this phrase has broadened and refers also to: “ethically responsible food makes a good person” (on linking fairness and pleasure Mol 2009: 274 – 277).

Both variants are problematic—they not only actualize the notion that those, who can afford comparatively expensive vegan cookies, instead of a suspiciously produced milk powder and palm oil products, are better people, but might also construct a moral imperative of categorizing people in “better” and “worse,” viewing the sad figure of a “microwave dinner eater” with pity and even disdain (Steim and Nemeroff 1995). Such categorization works against societal solidarity, facilitating alienation and individualization regarding societal nourishment.

Furthermore, the use of this phrase allows shaming not only those who cannot afford good food but also those that do not adhere to dominating beauty standards—you are what you eat and *vice versa*—you are eating according to how you look, so why are you poisoning yourself?

Thus, “you are what you eat”¹⁰ is contradictory to the idea that Feuerbach transmits, stating the self-evident truth that a man without food is nothing and is consumed by the perceptible nothingness of malnourishment. Instead of highlighting the obvious materiality of socio-political discourse, the use of the phrase only broadens the chasm between comparatively well-off population and more impoverished groups of society.

These “embodied ideologies” stem from a broader physiological discourse and the reactive nihilism paradigm, within which a better future both socially, physiologically, and ethically is envisioned via the betterment of individual bodies. Gilles Deleuze has coined the concept of reactive nihilism that denotes the age of God’s murderer, where the ideals of the traditional dualism (namely, “negative nihilism”) are brought “to Earth,” yet, maintaining the same form via reductionist scientific objectification (Deleuze 2006: 148–151, see further Sauka 2020b). Reactive nihilism is strongly connected to the reductionist understanding

9 One extreme example of this might be the movement of “biohackers”—a group advertising a kind of transhumanist approach to medicine, nutrition and lifestyle, for exploring possibilities to “overcome” or mitigate the limits of human mortality. (Coenen 2017; Wexler 2017). Other examples include keto, non-gluten, etc. diets that are gaining popularity today.

10 The transformation of “man is” to “you are” would also make interesting genealogical research that should also be informed by Brillat-Savarin’s famous exclamation: “the fate of citizens depends on the way they eat” (1825/1970: 13). The scope of this article, however, does not allow further exploration of the topic.

of the en fleshed self, a view of the human body as a mechanical, measurable thing that can be normalized and optimized; far from the experienced, lived materiality and a processual en fleshedness. It is a reversed (not refuted) dualism that first develops within the reductionist discourse of physiology in the 19th Century (Sarasin 2000: 51–52) and upholds a hope of overcoming en fleshedness, either by mechanical optimization or an outright escape from the flesh by, for example, uploading the conscious mind onto some type of data carrier.¹¹ In a less extreme version, the dualist presuppositions within this kind of reversed dualism are present in all manner of health advice employing the prefix *neuro*¹², advertising a reductionist, yet, transformable view of the human brain—a meaning cluster that proliferates the paradoxical image of a preset and deterministic bodily apparatus that should nevertheless be adequately maintained and enhanced. A picture not unlike the ideology of eugenicists¹³, where one’s body is simultaneously an inescapable fate as well as individual responsibility.

From phenomenology to biology, many thinkers today agree that “the skin-line is not the great divide” (Gendlin 2017), and the body is instead a stable process, influenced and co-constituted by its outside and inside working together (see Dupré 2012; Nicholson and Dupré 2018; Gendlin 2017). Next to *Leib* phenomenology, the link between bodies and environments via a nature-cultured understanding of senseful materiality is emphasized by feminist posthumanist and new materialist thinkers, such as Stacy (2010), Astrida Neimanis (2017), and others.

Although scientific theories and scholarly endeavours that theorize neuroplasticity (Rose and Abi-Rached 2013: 12), transcorporeality (Alaimo 2010), epigenetic variation (Jablonka and Lamb 2014), and the enactive mind-in-the-brain environment dynamic (Noë 2009; Varela, Thompson and Rosch 1991), challenge the reductionist view, the image of an autonomous, brain-centered mind as a governor of its materiality continues to rule within the cultural imaginaries. That is due, possibly, to a lack of theorizations that would speak to the individual (Schoeller and Dunaetz 2018: 31) and insufficient exploration of the link between genes and the environment (Alaimo 2010: 3); thus, upholding the image of a genetically determined individual that is nevertheless separately autonomous from the environment and could strive for control over the “inner environment”. It is on these premises that the systems of moral judgment of the eating person today are formed.

The underlying understanding of the body as a mechanical “thing” that, nevertheless, also exhausts the plane of meaning of the human self, facilitates this figuration—as the main

11 The ideology of reactive nihilism is, thus, closely linked also to the transhumanist ideology. For example, *Strategic Social Initiative 2045*, 2012.

12 On the prefix *neuro*, substituting *psych* see Rose and Abi-Rached 2013: 6–8.

13 “[...] National Socialist ideology rested on the belief that social relations and political problems could ultimately be attributed to biological causes. At the same time, representatives of the regime regularly denied concepts of biological determinism and stressed that natural, organic facts were essentially ‘historical and spiritual’ facts. As a result, education and willpower were regarded as having a decisive meaning for the development of individuals and collectives” (Lemke 2011: 11). In contrast, with eugenics, however, today the responsibility is individual, rather than societal, see Rose 2007 on ethopolitics.

source of selfhood, the reversed dualism of reactive nihilism ascribes to the body the same aspirations and responsibilities that negative nihilism inscribed onto the soul. Your body should also be the main conveyor of identity, and negligence of the body is almost identical to negligence towards the soul. Consequently, a sort of sacral secularity of the body strengthens the moral imperative to keep the body “pure,” not for the sake of an eternal soul, but its own sake—for extending its functions and enhancing performance (see further Sauka 2020b).

Furthermore, the presupposition of supposedly autonomous agents is upheld by the underlying substance ontology that values *things* before *processes* (Nicholson and Dupré 2018). Thus, the other side of the coin in the equation “individual agent and food” is the food itself, which is also reduced to individual products. That is evident in the context of capitalist consumerism that values things and goals before processes. Autonomous identity is established via purchasing the right products. The idea of identifying the self with what one has (and in this case—eats) rather than with what one *is*, is already discussed in detail in Erich Fromm’s studies *To Have or to Be?* (Fromm 1976) and *The Art of Being* (Fromm 1992). Here I venture to transform this distinction in a Deleuzian vein to a conceptual distinction of *becoming*¹⁴ and *having*, as the imagery of “being” as something static and characterized by fixity and autonomy is only possible via a discourse of objectification, namely, the mode of having.¹⁵

Understanding food as something that *becomes* rather than *is* (as consumable, passive materiality) is especially highlighted by Jane Bennett, who states: “Food too reveals materiality’s instability, vagrancy, activeness” (Bennett 2007: 136). Becoming and having, thus, respectively represent: a) food as part of life’s processes and b) food as an accessory of a personality that leads to shopping for meaning in the supermarket.

Instead of considering body-environment processes, the embodied acceptance of a substance ontology urges to encapsulate the meanings such as “health” or “green thinking” in the products themselves. Today, meaning can be quite literally bought in a shop that will cater to all tastes of “food philosophies.” Starting from products for vegans and sugar-haters, to a juicy

14 “The concept of becoming is in many respects simply an extension of the notion of multiplicity, highlighting the temporal process, the production of multiplicities. Deleuze and Nietzsche both, of course, are here engaging one of the central problems of the history of philosophy: the relation between being and becoming. They emphasize becoming to highlight the fact that being itself is an act of creation, and that creation can only be understood as the production of differences, of multiplicities.” Michael Hardt’s “Foreword” to *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (Deleuze 2006: ix).

15 The difference might seem only linguistic, yet it also moves beyond the dialectic of being and having as two seemingly disassociated characterological modes of existence, when, in fact, having is to be thought of as part and parcel of what becoming is, since it is part of the experienced materiality and the way intentionality allows objectification of the body. A *cancerous*, pathological proliferation of having—alienated from becoming—facilitates attributing *thingness to identity* and highlights the problematic aspects of the endeavors to constrain, fixate and stop the continuous movement of meaning production and view life and identity as consumable and hoardable things. Deleuze’s philosophy is characterized by a refutation of dialectics; here I specifically refer to the overcoming of dialectics in context with becoming and the Dionysian element in Nietzsche’s philosophy (Deleuze 2006: 8–10).

steak for those who follow Feuerbach's rule "whatever is eaten and eats" (Grün 1874: 83; cited in Chernov 1963: 400) and: "A man who enjoys only a vegetable diet is only a vegetating being, is incapable of action" (Grün 1874: 83; cited in Chernov 1963: 401).¹⁶ Such a setting provides a fruitful ground for shopping for meaning. If meaning is constituted in fixed states of selfhood considered via the ownership of a magnificent body or an ideal morality, individual agents become the perfect consumers for the widest variety of products. Given current environmental anxieties, there is a shift in product marketing, yet the underlying paradigm, embedded in substance ontology and reactive nihilist attitudes is left unchanged. Complemented by official policies, lifestyle marketing today has found a new niche that addresses the consumer-citizen (Mol 2009), and two interrelated axes emerge: a) the association of the product with "health" and b) the association of the product with "greenness" and "fairness". Both also result in a peculiar association of "health" with "environmentalism".

Annemarie Mol outlines this shift in meanings, stating that the search for "pleasure" has been supplemented by the orientation on "health" and "fairness" in product advertisement and purchasing. Although the imperative of health, prevalent in Northern societies today (Elton 2019: 10), seems admirable, the lack of conceptualizing the entanglement of food products and environments and humankind necessitates assuming a critical distance towards accepting the consumption of certain products as the epitome of a healthy lifestyle. Seeing that the conceptual tie between food and health is mostly conceptualized via food as the end-product focusing on its *thingness*; dismissing the food production and consumption networks (Elton 2019: 10), it is easily understandable how the industry largely comes to appropriate the discourse of health for gaining profits. Consequently, the notion of health itself becomes problematic—among others, a relational understanding of health would reflect on long-term health effects rather than the immediate health effects for the individual.¹⁷

Hence, while I can agree with Mol's reflection that today's association of pleasure and fairness and pleasure and health provides a conceptualization that oversteps the traditional dualist mind and body distinction (Mol 2009), the overcoming of the mind/body distinction reflects the predominant reversed dualism that rests on a substance ontology, rather than merges the lines of mind/body and the environment. The product-oriented conceptualization of health, pleasure, and fairness, thus, does not take into account the processual character of the eating process and the entanglement of selfhood and the outside world and creates cultural imaginaries populated by biophysical markers and Instagram pictures of portions that either picture food as "fuel" or as an identity marker that does not facilitate the understanding of the body to go beyond autonomous selfhood only serving to embed moral gratification of the eater in the things themselves.

16 To be fair, I should note that Feuerbach here was referring to potatoes, which he advised to replace with beans, hence, this is again a case of a misread phrase.

17 In the words of Sarah Elton: "Even if the food provides needed nutrients to the body and keeps disease at bay, if food production damages water systems and contributes to climate change, we cannot continue to call this healthy food if we embrace a relational notion of health" (Elton 2019: 11).

In a way, one might agree with Žižek, who outlines the problems of green capitalism in his speeches, and even expresses the wish to bomb “Starbucks”¹⁸ for including a fee for environmental causes into the coffee prices. The inclusion of price for environmental damage alleviates the guilt that usually comes with buying consumer products and transforms consumerism into a path to achieve instant moral gratification via monetary means. Today, consumerism has not only appropriated individual longings and desires but also caters to the broader moral trepidation about ecological and environmental problems. Thus, food has become the “quick fix” of existential and ethical concerns.

The elusive ‘thingness’ of the achievements—namely, the belief in the possibility to get perfect results and the idea that a perfect, fixable “thingness” is obtainable, together with the factual inaccessibility of these ideals, immeasurably broadens the limits of imagination of the producer. The ideology of acquiring perfection without pain and effort—present in both Žižek’s (2010: 7) and Fromm’s (1992: 24) critiques of capitalism—allows attracting consumers to the corresponding products for their “lifestyles”. Having a product that fixes all the desired body goals and allows instantly achieving success fits the scenario of building an identity without considerable effort nor the involvement of a process of progression (see also Mol 2009: 272–273).

Moreover, to eat a specific diet responsibly often requires a super-human effort since it is hard to find out all the information on food logistics, food products used in farming and producing a specific product, etc. It is, thus, most often easier to rely on the producer and buy pre-packaged goods for a specific lifestyle, rather than filtering raw products for cooking “from scratch” and finding out if they adhere to the standards of one’s ideal diet in both an ethical and health-related context. When the focus is entirely product-driven, health appeal easily opens up possibilities for creating “health products” that substitute those product categories that would otherwise fall into the “healthy eating” category (such as fresh produce) with their industrial pseudo-counterparts.

In the words of Annemarie Mol:

Criticism seems appropriate. What is ‘natural’ in all of this? And what about the price: ‘health foods’ provide producers with impressive profits in a market where non-processed food (should I say ‘natural’ food?) has very small margins. What is more: most scientific knowledge about the relation between food and health is thin and easy to contest (Mol 2009: 273).

Not to mention that some of the popular lifestyles today include diets such as keto and non-gluten diets that were invented for specific medical goals and, thus, require complicated planning as it is. The consequences of the producer politics to invent products for specific diets, however, are not that good for the environment—every specific diet opens a broad scope of possibilities for packaging agricultural products in enticing forms that rest

18 “I am not a terrorist, but if I were to be a terrorist, I would say—bomb Starbucks” (Žižek 2018). Also see Žižek 2010: 236.

on monoculture farming. Since the consumption and production of animal products and animal food have not significantly decreased, veganism, for example, only adds to the environmental threat of monoculture farming industries instead of diminishing it (Clark 2018). Moreover, specific products often also require additional packaging.

However, the situation is aggravated by the fact that buying “organic” or “ecological” is the exception, rather than the rule, and, according to the World Health Organization¹⁹, most of the products in supermarkets today contain much more sugar (Nordqvist 2018) and food additives than a regular human diet should contain. This fact, complemented by the increasingly contradictory health-advice on which products are safe to eat, understandably has driven people towards finding a specific healthy lifestyle, which then necessitates the use of products designed specifically for such use. Furthermore, this is discriminatory against lower-income households, as for many, the vegan diet will inevitably mean oatmeal with water, rather than avocados, the production of which is also quite controversial (Gaeta).

The ethical consequences of the ontogenealogies²⁰ represented by and facilitated by the formula “you are, what you eat”, however, might be acceptable (or rather could be critically assessed via a different approach) if this message represented the factual existential standing of humanity. Unsurprisingly, however, this is also a problematic question. In a sense, humans definitely are what they eat; when the food reaches stomach and guts, it is, however, processed, no longer a bun or a roast, it is converted into nutrients, waste materials, mineral substances, vitamins and, in the last instance, energy. In the words of posthumanist thinker Jane Bennett, “My meal is and is not mine; you are and are not what you eat” (Bennett 2007: 134). If food, as something that “one is”, is conceived in a reductionist manner—outside of the nexus of human and non-human actors—I could nourish myself with futuristic nutritional tablets instead of fancy lifestyle foods.

However, the message conveyed by “you are, what you eat” is concerned instead with the *surface*, the moment when food becomes something external, an accessory to take pride in or feel shame about—an *instagrammable* portion for self-identification. The identification process has its materiality, of course, although the symbolic meaning here might be much more pronounced. Who are we as citizens, family members, and how do we relate to others in our communities? (Mol 2009). These questions are important; however, problematic here is the tight bond that concrete food products build with certain ways of presenting one’s identity, particularly taking into account the fact that one is never completely free in making food choices. Decisions are influenced by everything that co-constitutes humankind, starting from the gut-bacteria (that supposedly have a say in this choice, see Leitão-Gonçalves et al. 2017) to the industry, communities, and the leading ideologies of healthy lifestyles, which are heavily impacted by the competing food producers of either fat or sugar-packed foods.

19 “WHO suggests a further reduction of the intake of free sugars to below 5% of total energy intake (conditional recommendation)” (*Guideline: Sugar Intake for adults and children*, 2015: 16).

20 The use of this term is here, in my opinion important, since the lifestyle genealogies also co-constitute lived materialities.

Shifting guilt and responsibility to the individual whose choices are regarded as defining for the future of the environment, two birds are struck with one stone: first, an individual can gain moral gratification for a moral decision at the shelf of a supermarket and; second, the individual sense of guilt conceals the necessity for structural changes.²¹ While stores continue to provide sliced broccoli packed in plastic, the demand for the product will continue because a responsibility shared with everyone often results in a diffusion of responsibility (Nollkaemper 2018) that, in this case, leads to no responsibility at all.

In line with the overall paradigm of reactive nihilism that inscribes meanings in physiology while upholding its autonomy, food today has acquired almost a sacral meaning, as the stuff of identity (Probyn 2003). With the *negative framing* of the environment (Neimanis, Åsberg, Hedrén 2015), society has become an easy target to advertisements and loud manifestos of “health” or “ethics” which can, among others, also instigate an “allergic” reaction against changing supposedly “bad” consumption habits. Thus, product-centered food lifestyles also facilitate societal polarization—food becomes a bone of contention for sharpening one’s teeth while concealing the factual processuality, inclusion, and interaction of societies, environments, and bodies (incl. the bodies of non-human actors).

In context with the prevalent consumption patterns in the Global North, global discussions on the benefits of certain food preferences (esp. in popular science and marketing contexts) propagate an ideology that assumes by implication that the food involved is store-bought. The discussion, thus, disregards sociopolitical situatedness. Where environmental concerns meet animal ethics, these generalizations are particularly evident, as animal suffering, for example, is assumed to be a prerequisite for acquiring eggs or milk. The alternative of domestic food production is rarely addressed in the ethical considerations or severely underrepresented. Close relations with animals and a personal involvement in food production is the reality for many in Latvia, which leads me to consider Latvia as a possible source of knowledge production in the juxtaposition of product and process-oriented approaches to ethical questions relating to food.

2. Thinking Food in Latvia

Public discussions on political and cultural issues of foodways and consumption focus on Global Northern or Western European contexts, underrepresenting post-Soviet or Baltic experiences (Mincyte, and Plath 2015; 2017). While the Global South slowly gains scholarly attention, praxes characteristic to the European East are continuously marginalized and not considered as a source of knowledge production. The reasons for this situation stem from a broader problem of knowledge networks.

21 Picking out food in restaurants strengthens this point of argument—how can I choose between broccoli or a burger if I do not know how this broccoli was harvested or if it was packaged, etc.?

Social scientists of different spheres have problematized the marginalization of Eastern Europe (see, for example, Kovačević 2008; Wolff 1994) or the constitution of the “East” as the Other that co-produces the identity of the West as its better counterpart (Neumann 1999). Some scholars argue that the advent of the distinction of the Global North and South saw the vanishing of the “Second World” of the former USSR countries (Müller 2018, pp. 3–4; Jehlička et al. 2020: 286–287) that has led to the East’s exclusion from the “map of knowledge production” (Müller 2018: 3).

Additionally, since product-centered marketing strategies and moral gratification packaged as a consumer goods often speak over the voices of science-based advice and sustainability politics, and policies in everyday consumer-directed contexts²², societies globally undergo increasing commodification of ethical and health-related values and attitudes.

Caught between twofold distinctions of North and South, and East and West that are further complicated by the Soviet past, Latvia has hitherto mostly been on the receiving end of knowledge production. In a recent article, “Thinking food like an East European: A critical reflection on the framing of food systems” (Jehlička et al. 2020), the authors introduce their research on food systems, providing a discussion of “agro-food practices in peripheral, non-Western context” (Jehlička et al. 2020: 290) that could benefit European discussions on sustainability and environmentally friendly food systems in the future.

For this article, it is relevant that they mention *exchange*, *transfer*, and domestic *production* of food as significant characteristics of Eastern European practices, stating that:

East European food systems are remarkably resilient as compared to the societies in the ‘centre’. The combination of options for obtaining food via *exchange* (people use their labour to purchase food), *transfer* (people use their membership in a local community to obtain food as a gift), and *production* (using land and skills people produce or forage their food) gives these societies a unique opportunity for experimentation and creativity—processes that should inspire scholars both within and beyond the region (Jehlička et al. 2020: 293).

Here I argue that this focus also falls in line with a philosophical discussion of food and sustainability in everyday social contexts (namely, in context with the consumer position), as traditional food systems in Latvia show an affinity with proposals for reconsidering the importance of human relationships with food in terms of taking into account the situatedness of local practices and prioritizing process before product. Far from providing perfect solutions for sustainability, climate neutrality, and waste reduction²³, traditional praxes of Latvia

22 That is in some sense unavoidable in a capitalist market and refers to what Bourdieu conceptualizes as “symbolic capital” (Bourdieu 1990: 112 – 121).

23 The discussion of the systemic aspects of policy-making and structural change falls outside the scope of this article. It is impossible to evaluate specific policies within the terms of product-oriented or process-oriented practices that refer to a broad context of social ontogenealogies.

could provide insight for recontextualizing ethical approaches in terms of processes involved in food production and consumption, rather than the concrete food products themselves. These praxes include, for example, non-monetary exchange of food grown in private gardens and domestic animal breeding, beekeeping, fishing, and foraging, and point toward alternative ontologies that are possibly tied also to Baltic folklore and could provide viable ontogeneal alternatives to the reactive nihilism contexts discussed in the previous section.

Traditions, such as gardening, food transfer, and foraging, although less significant in a pragmatic context, remain “extremely important as a historical and cultural practice” (Trenouth and Tisenkopfs 2015: 369). This realization suggests that these practices could be revitalized within the new, largely West-originated contexts of environmentally conscious and health-oriented lifestyles that increasingly influence the daily lives of Latvian consumers.

Although the consumerization of food in the post-Soviet period has left a negative impact on traditional food-exchange practices, with the younger populations drawn to more attractive lifestyles coming from the Global North, Latvia has also been quite successful in synthesizing environmentally friendly and eco-conscious attitudes with traditional practices of gardening, foraging, and small-scale animal agriculture. In the article “Evolution of Household Foodscapes in Latvia” (Trenouth and Tisenkopfs 2015), research on changes in household foodscapes between the late Socialist period and today, the authors observe that:

Among many consumers, there is a common discontent with what Buchler, Smith, and Lawrence (2010) term ‘modern risks’ in the form of increased adulteration of foods, presence of chemical residues from pesticides and fertilizers, and the addition of artificial additives (Trenouth and Tisenkopfs 2015: 367).

Their observations suggest that in Latvia, parts of traditional knowledge have served as a barrier for adopting Western food consumption patterns (regarding industrial food consumption and consuming high volumes of convenience foods, import foods, and foods with chemical additives), by proxy also defending traditions such gardening, exchange, and foraging. The authors also conclude that:

Gardening and gathering of wild foods remain common practices in many households and are strongly rooted in cultural traditions. Social networks in exchanging homegrown food with relatives, neighbors and friends remain relevant, albeit in lower importance, and food continues to nourish social ties (Trenouth and Tisenkopfs 2015: 370).

The reasons for this cultural synthesis are manifold and could be partly related to the high value of nature in Baltic folklore and the self-identification of Latvians as peasants (Schwartz 2007) that has been formed at least from the 19th century, and after the 1990s was partly reinforced as a protest to Soviet industrialization.

Reinforcing existing process-oriented practices could help in developing an inclusive framework of the ethics of care (Elton 2009: 12) that would be more accessible in a financial and

societal context and facilitate ecological solidarity. Although food poverty often hinders the possibility of the financially disadvantaged populations in urban settings to look into the production patterns of foods consumed, the highlight of processuality allows moving beyond the focus on autonomous, individual bodies and stress environmental factors instead.

In a country, where the average earnings are 1076 Euro per month before taxes (Data of the Central Statistical Bureau, 2019) and a considerable part of the population lives on a minimum income (500 Eur per month before taxes, as of the year 2021), the revitalization of non-monetary food systems seems even more valuable. Today, the results of a recent Baltic Studies Centre's study on food consumption and choice in Latvia shows that 59.6% of 1046 respondents agree with the statement that healthy eating is expensive (Ādamsone-Fiskoviča et al. 2020: 15), and 31% of the respondents state that price is the most crucial criterion in food choices (Ādamsone-Fiskoviča et al. 2020: 7).

Moreover, the facilitation of process-oriented practices would also help to promote environmental consciousness. The future of the world's ecosystems does not, after all, rest on the fitness of individuals, and, although a transcorporeal understanding of the body does presume that environmental pollution also includes the toxicity of the body (Cielemeńska and Åsberg 2019; Marder 2021: 55–65), there is no direct reciprocal link that would allow cleaning the planet by purifying human bodies. Often the imperatives of health and the environment are conflictual (Resnik 2009). One could imagine a health-oriented argument that food produced in a domestic setting might not provide the health benefits of expensive “organic” products, as the domestic soil could presumably be contaminated by some local pollution that is thought to not be affecting farms that have acquired the label “organic”. An implication here seems to be present that only a product that enhances one's health can be sufficiently environmentally friendly or that the eco-conscious attitudes are of value mainly due to their health benefits.

In context with societal solidarity, focusing on processes of food production and consumption, rather than products themselves, would be more inclusive of those who do not seek health advice or do not feel welcomed by the aesthetic ideology encapsulated in the phrase “you are what you eat” that facilitates the assumption that a person's appearance might suggest what they eat. It would also mitigate the conflicts of different lifestyle groups, such as vegans and keto dieters. The possibility that such conflictual situations might arise is also suggested by data, as the aforementioned research report states that almost half of the respondents (47.6%) cite consumers as responsible for eating healthy and environmentally friendly food, putting the “blame” also on food processing companies (45.4%), but less so on government (22.2%) or the European Union (8.7%) (Ādamsone-Fiskoviča et al. 2020: 18). This may have an affinity with what Žižek so vehemently criticizes (product-oriented moral gratification strategies); yet, the acceptance of consumer responsibility also provides fruitful ground for revitalizing non-monetary food systems as individual living strategies via the promotion of processuality.

Lastly, an ethics of care centered on the sustainability of food networks, rather than the health benefits of the foods, could prove beneficial for promoting inclusiveness and

solidarity of the local community in Latvia with regard to environmental concerns. A processual understanding of food consumption is more inclusive of rural communities, where the transfer and exchange of traditional goods provides a sustainable alternative for economically disadvantaged and advantaged populations alike, providing fresh and local produce that might not adhere to the standards of a “fitness-oriented” diet (such as potatoes, dairy products, etc.).

This is crucial today, at a time when the locals in Latvia still doubt the seriousness of climate concerns and tend to perceive such notions as an alien threat rather than a supplement to traditional knowledge. Moreover, individuals rarely cite environmental concerns as the driving reasons for food consumption and choice practices: in the aforementioned research report, only 3.7% of 1046 respondents stated that in the last 12 months that they have started to choose products that are more environmentally friendly, while 17.8% state that they have started to eat “healthier” (Ādamsonsone-Fiskoviča et al. 2020: 14). Overall, consumers are more concerned with health factors than meeting environmental or ethical goals, with only 17.9% citing socially responsible and ethical production as one of the three main factors directing their consumption choices, while 70.7% cited health reasons—thus, demonstrating health as the second most important factor contributing to food choices after price, which was significant for 71.7% of the respondents (Ādamsonsone-Fiskoviča et al. 2020: 8).

It seems paradoxical for a country where “nature” has always been held in such high esteem, yet this could indicate that environmental concerns are viewed as alien and not recognized as related to traditional practices, already in place. When certain praxes are viewed as foreign and invading, the realization that recycling resembles composting and “the Nordic diet” basically equals traditionally prepared Latvian meals, might be lost, leading to either enthusiastic acceptance of product-oriented, eco-consciousness, and lifestyle changes or a denial to take part in any environmentally-focused activities. Environmental consciousness, thus, acquires the form of either an unattainable ideal or a looming threat to the existing tradition. Both options suggest a level of reverence toward the perceptually “more-developed” West and lead to evading environmental consciousness altogether as a sort of Western luxury *or*, alternatively, investing oneself in the consumption of morally or health-wise “appropriate” goods.

It might be argued that this is not the case in Latvia, as gardening and foraging already enjoy a synthesis with the new eco-conscious lifestyles (at least for younger generations); however, marketing strategies of health and wellness industries, as well as the capitalist appropriation of moral gratification in ethical matters threatens to disrupt or destroy this fragile bond²⁴, which is still comparatively new. For example, Latvians seem to value pure “natural” foods, but mostly cite taste and health benefits, rather than environmental aspects in their pursuit of organic products. As, an example, Trenouth and Tisenkopf’s notice that:

24 The fragility of this bond is exemplified by the fact that 13.4% of respondents in the Baltic Studies Centre’s research report cited “weight control” as a reason for changing their food consumption habits in the last 12 months, while only 2% cited “care for the environment” as a driving factor for that change (Ādamsonsone-Fiskoviča et al. 2020: 12). The data suggests that the discourse cluster detailed in the first part of this article might also be strongly present in Latvian society.

[...] informants felt that organic, clean, natural, Latvian products, reminiscent of what they ate as children, simply tasted better than their more adulterated, new, and foreign counterparts. [...] Health concerns have become more prominent in today's decision-making process, especially amongst women, where 'healthy food' is often associated with organic, unadulterated products, relatively free of additives and chemical residue from production. Šūmane (2010) noted that in the initial phase of organic agriculture in Latvia in the 1990s, health concerns were among the driving factors for farmers in their transition to organic agriculture. (Trenouth and Tisenkopfs 2015: 367)

Positive reinforcement of existing practices might facilitate the recognition that eco-consciousness is not foreign. Moreover, it could promote the acceptance of European Green Deal policies, and lead to a fruitful synthesis of local and West-originated approaches in gardening, forestry, and agriculture.

3. Conclusions

The conclusions that can be drawn from the discussion of food consumption and production practices in Latvia are not univocal. On one hand, the continuous marginalization of Baltic and Eastern European contributions to scientific and everyday discourses might facilitate the disintegration of traditional food systems, such as domestic farm animal breeding and vegetable growth, especially when faced with the reactive nihilism practices of “you are what you eat”—strengthened by the invasion of import “health” goods in Latvian markets. On the other hand, scientific insight coming from the European West (also in popular culture translations) often reinvigorates forgotten practices—a growing interest in “healthy foods” also facilitates growing foods in urban settings and highlights the benefits of traditional food systems, making it possible for Baltic considerations to be heard. In this science-based context, Western-based food sustainability efforts and environmental philosophies are, thus, a necessary informational tool.

The complexity of the situation reinvigorates the discussion of existential philosophical context framed by the processual (*becoming* oriented) and substance-oriented (*having* oriented) directions of understanding bodies and the ecologies in which they are involved. Significantly, the aforementioned Latvian food practices denote a process-oriented outlook that goes beyond “shopping for meaning” and ascribes meaning to *how* food is prepared and gathered, rather than the product itself. The value of certain food products is not directly health-related but instead depends on human-environment interaction, and this relation itself is culturally valuable.

This factor points toward an alternative ontogenealogy, beyond the reactive nihilist paradigm and possibly beyond substance ontology. Intermixed with the patterns imported from the Global North, possibly since the Christianization of Latvian communities in the 13th

Century, Latvia, as one of the last pagan communities in Europe, provides ample ground for further ontogenealogical investigation that, however, lays out of the scope of this article.

Overall, it seems that the systemic, processual approaches that are increasingly gaining significance in large-scale structural policies could also benefit from existing Latvian praxes that could be employed as local vehicles for popularizing process-oriented attitudes. Namely, the local practices and attitudes, inherited from the previous generations, can function as a close-to-home alternative to the leading consumerism-driven discourses as sources of moral gratification and examples of processual, food-network centered environmental activism, as well as possibly provide a fertile ground for scientific insight to food sustainability (as suggested by Jehlička et al. 2020). That might also be a mutually beneficial process, as eco-conscious and health-oriented trends from Western Europe might facilitate maintaining and revitalizing the cultural heritage practices that have lost some of their popularity since the declaration of independence.

Thus, for now, it seems sufficient to conclude that traditional food networks in the Latvian community can serve as an example of the merits of process-oriented ethics of food in sustainability contexts, and as such, could add to the global discussion of environmental ethics. This is especially crucial at a time when environmental humanities warn against the intangibility of the environment and the depoliticization of environmental concerns (Neimanis, Åsberg, Hedrén 2015), while scholarly discussions express the need to reconceptualize the idea of sustainability to bring it closer to the community (Ingold 2021), and posthuman theorists point out the importance of considering the processual embeddedness of food (Elton 2019; Whatmore 2002).

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Jēgas lielveikalā: pārtikas patēriņa ontoloģijas Latvijā

Anne Sauka

Atslēgvārdi: ģenealoģija, ontogenealoģija, process, produkts, reaktīvais nihilisms

Iezīmējot Ludviga Feuerbaha slavenās frāzes “cilvēks ir tas, ko viņš ēd” ģenealoģiju, šajā rakstā tiek analizēti pārtikas patēriņa eksistenciālo un ētisko prakšu ontoloģiskie pamati, nošķirot uz produktu orientētas un procesuālas ontoloģijas. Paplašinot ierasto kritiskās ģenealoģijas jēdzienu ar jaunā materiālisma teorētiskajiem apsvērumiem par ķermeņa procesualitāti un dzīvoto materialitāti, rakstā izmantota ontogenealoģiska pieeja, kas ļauj pievērsties sociālpolitisko transformāciju un dzīvotās materialitātes savstarpējības analīzei. Konceptuālais fons cilvēka attiecībās ar ēdienu rakstā tiek skaidrots caur reaktīvā nihilisma un substanču ontoloģijas prizmu. Šiem jēdzieniem piesaistītās parādības rakstā tiek problematizētas kā “iemiesotās ideoloģijas” kontekstā ar jaunā materiālisma diskusijām par pārtikas, veselības un vides savstarpējību. Otrā raksta daļa ir veltīta diskusijai par pārtikas sagādes praksēm Latvijā. Tradicionālas ēdiena sagādes prakses rakstā tiek aplūkotas kā alternatīvs zināšanu avots, kura ontogenealoģisko fonu veido marginālas, citastarp arī procesuālas ontoloģijas un “iemiesotās ideoloģijas”, ko šobrīd pamatā nomāc dominējošais ontogenealoģiskais fons. Kultūras mantojuma iedzīvināšana pārtikas ražošanas un patēriņa sfērās tiek izskatīta kā iespējams nākotnes risinājums vides humanitāro zinātņu cīņā ar produktu orientētu ideoloģiju negatīvajiem faktoriem, īpaši kontekstā ar patērētāja morālā apmierinājuma piesaisti noteiktam produktam un vides atsvešinājumu. Raksta mērķis ir demonstrēt nepieciešamību pārdomāt un rekontekstualizēt situatīvas ontoloģijas, akcentējot to nozīmi iekļaujošas rūpju ētikas veidošanā. Rakstā secināts, ka situatīvu ontoloģiju iedzīvināšana varētu ne vien piedāvāt alternatīvu valdošajām ideoloģijām, bet arī veicināt vides problēmu apzināšanos un mazināt atsvešinātību attiecībās ar vidi, iedibinot saikni starp šībrīža procesuālām pieejām vides izpratnē un lokāli situētām zināšanām un tādējādi rūpes par vidi padarot kā kaut ko lokālā kontekstā pazīstamu.