

LECTIO PRÆCURSORIA¹

Patchworks of care: Ethics and practice of care in the organic food movement in Latvia

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A lectio præcursoria is a short presentation read out loud by a doctoral candidate at the start of a public thesis examination in Finland. It introduces the key points or central argument of the thesis in a way that should make the ensuing discussion between the examinee and the examiner apprehensible to the audience, many of whom may be unfamiliar with the candidate's research or even anthropological research in general.

Honoured Custos, honoured Opponent, ladies and gentlemen,

I am happy to welcome you to this online defence. Allow me to open this introductory lecture with an ethnographic description:

One day, when the new soil has been delivered and distributed among the seed trays and small plastic boxes, Jurgis, one of my key research participants heads out to sow a new batch of radish and mustard. Ieva, his wife, tells me to follow him to observe the speed and dexterity with which he works. She speaks admiringly, admitting she could not do the process half as well.

As I observe, I see clearly what Ieva meant by highly trained skills, something illustrated mainly by Jurgis' hand movements. His hand opens and crinkly radish and rounded mustard seeds scatter across the flat surface of the soil in the small plastic box. The process is fast; more and more boxes are filled with radish and mustard and piled in towers next to each other. The process seems so simple performed by Jurgis but this is only in appearance. In reality, it might

take months and maybe even several planting seasons until one learns to grab the right amount of seed and perform the correct swaying movement of the hand so that the seeds scatter evenly and do not accumulate on the sides or in cracks in the soil. When I ask how the soil is made so flat, Jurgis demonstrates the technique, pressing a full box onto a freshly filled box to obtain a level surface. The right amount of seed is crucial, according to Jurgis, who says that some of their competitors are over-filling boxes, which creates an unpleasant aroma as rot sets in faster in the densely planted boxes.

On Ieva and Jurgis' farm, with more than 100 different crops, the skills are obtained and extended, inter-developed and interchanged. Vicky Singleton and John Law (2013) argue that the changing circumstances of farming materialities play an essential role in the accumulation through repetition of such everyday caring, as the materiality on the farm is itself heterogeneous. For Jurgis such everyday materialities include plants in their different stages: seeds, seedlings, partially and fully grown plants. Soil, water, and scissors, as well

as his hands themselves. The heterogeneous contact between these materialities creates the embodied registers of the intimacy of care work. Thus, the heterogenous spatiotemporalities of care are maintained and continued by reaching out and overcoming the borders between self and otherness.

This study explores the everyday work, ideals, and values of the organic food movement known as *tiešā pirkšana* (meaning ‘direct purchasing’, TP) in Latvia. TP is an initiative which aims to shorten the physical and symbolic distance between producers and consumers; producers, market, and regulating policies, and consumers and food.

I apply the concept of ‘reconnection’ to analyse the process of shortening the distance between the different actors involved in this small-scale food provisioning system. By focusing on the notion that there is a link between the reconnection process and the ethics and practice of care, I decipher different forms of care in the various stages of food provisioning in the TP movement. I pay equal attention to the manifestation of care in the different stages of food provisioning in the movement: care in the food production on the farms – in the processes such as growing the plants and caring for animals and farm environments and care in logistics. That includes harvesting, packing, delivery, and distribution of produce, and care in consumption. That entails various care in foodwork at the households with an underlying purpose to nurture and reproduce the kin relations. I pay particular attention to the invisible care work of dishwashing and cleaning up, as well as the generational and gendered dynamics of feeding.

The ethnographic material for the dissertation was collected during long-term

ethnographic fieldwork in 2015 and 2016. The longer (up to one month) stays on two farms and with one consumer family provided me with rich ethnographic material on the role of care in the production and consumption of food. This thick data is supported with a material from the one day visits and conversations with producers at their farms, long term participation observation and conversations in the different TP’s branches across Latvia, and the data obtained by becoming a participant of one of the branches in Riga.

Ethnographic primary data also includes contextual material obtained at the meetings of the TP movement and the seminars organised within the educational and marketing campaign, BioLoģiski that was ongoing in Latvia from 2014 to 2016. Finally, the movement’s online presence in negotiations over changes in TP’s organization and politics was observed by following common e-mail lists and social networks groups.

In 2009 TP started as small-scale collaboration system between one consumer family and several organic producers in northern Latvia. In 2015 it had become a fully functioning food provisioning system connecting farmers and producers across several regions in Latvia.

During my fieldwork in 2015 and 2016 the movement comprised around 1,000 consumers and about 150 farming households. Over 20 local branches of the movement were situated in the capital and the biggest cities and towns in the northern, northeast and western regions of Latvia. The localities of the active centres of the movement corresponded with what were, historically, the most dynamic centres of the first organic farming communities, which were located around Liepāja, Cēsis, and Sigulda in the 1990s. In line with its three core values:

friendship, volunteerism and organicity, the movement functioned as a self-organising food distribution initiative. Every week consumers in local branches ordered food from the range that was provided by organic farmers. What was on offer was influenced by seasonality, weather conditions, and each farmer's specific kind of crops. Orders were made through a common online platform, which was created especially for the movement and deliveries were made by farmers in person to local branches.

Impressed by the movement's obvious success I kept returning to one question that puzzled me somewhat throughout the research. How was it possible that the movement was so successful and had lasted so long? After all, I knew from my previous research and the recent history of Latvia that similar kinds of food activism had come and gone. The prevailing uncertainty and short-livedness have dogged both small and larger initiatives across the country since it regained independence. I was curious about what has kept the movement working, growing, and finally reproducing itself for more than ten years. How did TP become an important part of the ongoing changes in the wider food provisioning practices in Latvia?

Indeed, the movement had become a manifestation of growing understandings and enactments of self-organising food provisioning systems in Latvia. It also seemed to be the first relatively successful attempt to reconnect producers and consumers, and countryside and city. These reconnections were happening despite previous negative experiences that had led to disconnections and only very marginal collaboration schemes since the accession to the European Union.

As I mentioned in the introductory part of this presentation, the concept of reconnection became an important analytical tool. It helped

me to untangle and interpret the *secret* behind the continuity and success of the movement.

I build on the interpretation of the term 'reconnection' detailed by Moya Kneafsey and her colleagues (Kneafsey et al. 2008). They look at reconnection through various forms of alternative food provisioning practices in Europe. Such reconnection in alternative food provisioning can reference relationships between several parties: producers with the market, consumers with products, processes, and place, and, more generally, people with nature and whatever that entails.

Care and caring plays an important part in these reconnection processes. In my work a focus on the manifestations of ethics and practices of care had helped me to understand the often messy complexity of the reconnections in the TP movement.

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There is a commonly reproduced discourse on care as the ultimate manifestation of unconditional love, warm nurture, and sacrifice. Yet caring about or for something is not necessarily a joyful and pleasant act or experience. Indeed, it is likely that a proper act of care will involve plenty of unanticipated effort, the input of extra energy, some hesitation, and maybe even disgust. These stem from feelings of obligation and responsibility. In essence, such care can be seen as somewhat similar to what David Graeber (2018) has described as work itself. Activities that we perform because they need to be done, to obtain or take part in something else (2018: 156).

Care in everyday encounters is a rather odd mix of emotional and practical manifestations between humans, non-humans, surrounding environments, and materialities. Seen that way, care is neither bad nor good in itself (Mol et al. 2010: 12–13). Nor would it be right to assume

that care only equals love and affection, although it is an element of constant reproductive acts of some kind – reproduction of kin, persons, and lifeworlds. It is present wherever someone cares about/for somebody or something and where the processes of life are *continued, maintained, and repaired*. María Puig de la Bellacasa (2017: 1) suggests seeing care as wholesome affection, moral obligation, work, a burden, a joy, a learned practice, and something that we merely do.

In the TP movement, care and caring primarily materialised as a form of hard work and resilience. The diverse acts of care were pre-determined activities that were supposed to provide one or another kind of results. Simultaneously, care was also represented in the ideas and values that inspired and gave the necessary moral and ideological grounds for proceeding with these activities. Caring about or for something in TP meant that those involved in the reciprocity of care believed that they were bettering their own lives, as well as making the world they inhabit a somewhat better place. However, care and caring were far from being something homogenous and easy to define.

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This study shows that care that has traditionally been invisible is still very much so. Yet its enactments do not touch only upon the richly discussed gender divide in feminist literature. Forms of deeply embedded and seldom acknowledged care were present in almost all stages of food provisioning in the TP movement. Moreover, the manifestations of such embedded and invisible care—depending on the contexts of food production, distribution, and consumption—also involved different combinations of affection, obligation, responsibility, creativity, and economic interest.

This study demonstrates that cooking and feeding family and kin as an expression

of care for their wellbeing and a form of social reproduction was less gendered and rather more contextually ordered. I also describe the generational connections and disconnections through care, such as food practices directed at raising the so called ‘organic child’ (Lammer 2017; Cairns, Johnston and MacKendrick 2013), and the (dis)empowerment of grannies.

I show that care on farms is sometimes hard to recognise as it has both economic and affectionate roots. Thus, by acknowledging its economic importance in small-scale organic production, it is easier to grasp the extent of the relationality of care for humans, for non-humans, and for the environments they inhabit.

One of my research participants, Pauls, turned to bee keeping some few years before my fieldwork in 2016. Back then he was still working in Riga and attending the farm on weekends. His work in the city was very stressful and he needed some relaxing activity. He started with two bee colonies. During my fieldwork there were 50, and Pauls assumed that it could very well be 100 by the end of the year 2016. It is not, however that Pauls aimed to have as many as possible. Rather, he wanted to maintain a level that leaves space for love. ‘At the end of the day, it is clear you will not become rich by owning 100 bee colonies and 150 ewes’, he concludes.

None of the producers were farming purely for pleasure or self-sustenance. They wanted to promote their businesses and develop new, competitive forms of organic produce, and sometimes services. Yet they also always stressed the moral and affective grounds of the work they do. In fact, to them, proper care for the farm and their produce was of equal importance as making a good profit out of it. They knew that without their caring properly for the plants and animals, there would not be an income.

Another discussion to which this study contributes concerns whether the ongoing

care, or absence of it, at the different scales affected the movement's inner work, as well as its contextualisation in the wider framework of economic, political, and social relations in Latvia and globally. Also, of importance was whether the constant shifts and mutuality between scales ensured that some form of care was always present in all stages of food provisioning in the movement. More explicitly I show that much of the constant care work on the part of the movements participants—producers and consumers alike—was required in order to compensate for the absence of care from the state and EU level standardisation schemes. This was exemplified by the badly designed and maintained infrastructures.

For the movement to function successfully, several aspects of the infrastructural scarcity impacted on whether care acts could be carried out smoothly: firstly, these were inadequate roads and their largely poor condition, which could be interpreted as an expression of the state's lack of care for rural livelihoods, and secondly, a shortage of organic processing facilities. This was an outcome of a series of misplaced state and industries policies, or, rather lack of them. A third aspect, that was partially connected to infrastructural weakness, concerned the trials of small farmers when trying to form joint market schemes. Throughout the first 25 years of independence, all attempts to establish smaller or bigger joint market initiatives that entailed forming co-ops, establishing an organic shop in the local town, instituting a joint export scheme, or striking a profitable deal with retailers shut down or failed.

Often local limiting structural frameworks and the inability to form joint market schemes worked alongside global policy and market schemes. Thus, on one level, the forming of co-ops was contested due to prevailing distrust towards other fellow producers, as well as the

resemblance of such co-ops to the kolkhozes (Aistara 2018: 168). On another level, small organic farmers on the margins of the European Union felt thrown into unequal competition against well-off Western competitors or large-scale home producers with little chance of success (Aistara 2018; Gille 2016; Mincyte 2011).

Finally, this research demonstrates the close relationship between care and time. I show that perceptions and interpretations of historical time contribute to the repair and maintenance of the ideas and values of the movement, and also to the patchworked forms of everyday food practices in the households and while performing weekly shifts.

The relationships between time and care on the farms are demarcated by the tempos and rhythms of food production, harvesting, and deliveries. At the same time, I attend to the slowness, and often messiness, of such time. I show that exact and repetitive rhythms and tempos coexist in the 'tinkering' of care and 'taking time' for care, which sometimes acts against time or 'tricks time': 'jumping over' time or catching up with its due, for instance, to the unpredictability of the weather or infrastructures.

However, this dissertation is an explorative start to tracing and interpreting the different angles of 'care time'. I believe that further research, not only in the area of food provisioning practices, but in all spheres of life where care plays an important role is much needed.

NOTES

- 1 This *Lectio Praecursoria* contains parts of a published dissertation Bankovska, A. 2020. *Patchworks of Care: Ethics and Practice of Care in the Organic Food movement in Latvia*. Helsinki: University of Helsinki.

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