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# THINKING POLITICAL ECOLOGY WITH LATOUR, HARAWAY AND STENGERS\*

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## PENSANDO LA ECOLOGÍA POLÍTICA CON LATOUR, HARAWAY Y STENGERS

### **Abstract**

In recent years a significant number of contributions coming from different fields of study are developing an understanding of political ecology beyond the modern bifurcation between society and environment. Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour and Isabelle Stengers occupy a prominent place in the contemporary debate. In this article I explore a network of key concepts, such as terrestrial politics, Chthulucene and cosmopolitics, as a lure for thinking political ecology in the human-non-human continuum. These three perspectives are helping me to stay with three key problematics in

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contemporary politics: the necessity to think a third political space against and beyond regressive nationalism and green globalism, the processes of politicisation of a rising everyday environmentalism and the pragmatics capable of nurturing transversal alliances, compositions and coalitions amongst divergent singularities and socio-ecological movements in the time of the intrusions of Gaia.

### **Palabras clave**

Ecología política; cosmopolítica; naturalezacultura; política alternativa de la materia.

### **Resumen**

En los últimos años, un número significativo de contribuciones provenientes de diferentes campos de estudio están desarrollando una comprensión de la ecología política más allá de la bifurcación moderna entre sociedad y medio ambiente. Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour e Isabelle Stengers ocupan un lugar destacado en el debate contemporáneo. En este artículo exploro una red de conceptos clave, como política terrestre, Chthulucene y cosmopolítica, como un atractivo para pensar la ecología política en el continuo humano-no-humano. Estas tres perspectivas me están ayudando a quedarme con tres problemáticas clave en la política contemporánea: la necesidad de pensar un tercer espacio político frente y más allá del nacionalismo regresivo y el globalismo verde, los procesos de politización de un ambientalismo cotidiano en ascenso y la pragmática capaz de nutrir alianzas transversales, composiciones y coaliciones entre singularidades divergentes y movimientos socioecológicos en el tiempo de las intrusiones de Gaia.

### **Keywords**

Political ecology; cosmopolitics; natureculture; alternative politics of matter.

In recent years a significant number of contributions coming from Science and Technology Studies (Haraway, 2019; Latour, 2018; Papadopoulos, 2018; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017), cultural anthropology (Holbraad, Pedersen, & Viveiros de Castro, 2014; Kohn, 2013; Tsing, 2015; Viveiros de Castro, 2015), geography (Braun & Whatmore, 2010b), political theory (Bennet, 2010; Coole & Frost, 2010) and philosophy of science (Barad, 2007; Stengers, 2010, 2011) are developing an understanding of political ecology beyond the modern bifurcation between society and environment. Starting from divergent theoretical perspectives, this series of authors are inviting us to take seriously what Braun and Whatmore call *the stuff of politics* (Braun & Whatmore, 2010a). This expression emphasises the need to develop a conception of political ecology that does not separate the forms of human association and conflicts that we are used to call politics from the socio-material basis of life, and the concrete practices and infrastructures through which forms of life are created, reproduced, sustained. This focus on material politics brings with itself a significant attention for the role that more than human actors, including artefacts and technological objects, play within the fabric of social conduct. Politics is materialised through the ways in which things of all kinds – material objects, chemicals, bodies, machines, digital ecologies, ecosystems – help constitute the common worlds we share, and the dense fabric of relationships in and through which we live. The ecological perspective emphasises the interconnectedness of people, animals, plants and the geophysical world, as well as the intertwining of ecosystems, histories, technologies, institutions and cultures (Chakrabarty, 2021). While an environmental viewpoint predominantly conceives nature as separate from human societies, ecological thinking understands the complex web that binds together humans, non-humans and planetary worlds (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2014). According to Latour (Latour, 2018), ecological thinking introduces the biggest paradigm shift in the social sciences in the last fifty years, framing societies in interconnected multicultural and multinatural worlds.

Among the different theoretical perspectives that help us think political ecology beyond the environment-society dichotomy, those developed by Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour and Isabelle Stengers certainly occupy a prominent place in the contemporary debate. In the next three sessions I will explore a network of key concepts, such as terrestrial politics, Chthulucene and cosmopolitics, as a lure for thinking political ecology in the human-non-human continuum. Haraway sees the depletion of the culture of modern humanism and the simultaneous decentering of the human in relation to the material world, technologies and other species as a condition of possibility for experimenting with richer socio-material compositions and more sustainable

multispecies coexistences. Latour invites us to think the continuity of all worldly action within a human and non-human continuum, showing us how an ecological perspective can be developed beyond a normative notion of nature, which increasingly appears as the outcome of a purification that claims to separate human society from the material world. Finally, Stengers asks us, in the time of the intrusions of Gaia, to reactivate our capacity to pay attention. In the first instance, we must pay attention to what we depend on because, as Stengers tells us, humans depend on something greater than themselves, on a chain of susceptible forces with which, nevertheless, we must compose ourselves. As we will see in the next sections, these three perspectives are helping me to stay with three key problematics in contemporary politics: the necessity to think a third political space against and beyond regressive nationalism and green globalism, the processes of politicisation of a rising everyday environmentalism, the pragmatics and ethics capable of nurturing transversal alliances, compositions and coalitions amongst divergent singularities and socio-ecological movements.

## Political ecology in hybrid collectives

Rejecting any essentialist distinction between nature and society, Latour taught us that *we have never been modern* (Latour, 1993) humans, for millions of years, have extended their social relations to a range of non-human actors with whom they form material collectives. This notion of collective emphasises how human and non-human actors continuously compose each other in common worlds. Latour complicates and rethinks the category of agency, challenging the humanistic and intentional traits through which it is usually defined in sociological and political thought. Agency is the power to act and, in Latour's perspective, this power, or *potentia*, rather than being located exclusively in the human body, is distributed among all the things of the world. That's why Latour means by political ecology not so much a concern for nature but a certain way of fostering and conceiving the association between humans and non-humans as an alternative to modernisation. In this section I explore Latour's political ecology, starting from his materialistic approach.

“There are simply more agencies in the pluriverse, to use William James' expression, than philosophers and scientists thought possible” (Latour, 2005, 116). In Latour's thinking, things themselves are multiple. This notion of multiplicity has nothing to do with interpretative flexibility or symbolic representations, rather is, according to Latour,

the thing that dislocates itself as multiple. Because a thing is always a node, a pluriverse of material agents. The composition of the real is here defined as the outcome of actions and influences that actively involve heterogeneous actors: the real is always the outcome of a co-action, it is performed by a co-production of agents, enacted by a hybrid composition. A pluriverse is never a stable object but is continuously performed by a set of relationships and actions carried out by both human and non-human agents.

Latour is telling us that in the constitution of a material world, human beings are not the central actor, rather they share their agency with a diverse number of material agents of which they are not masters and over which they exercise no control. This perspective complicates the modern bifurcation between subjects and objects. Moreover, an entity's power to act is not separable from the network of relationships that influence a possible action. Heterogeneous connections perform the real, which is the unstable, always provisional outcome of exercises of creation involving a plurality of agents, both human and non-human. The continuity of a flow of actions is allowed, permitted, made possible by this co-action, co-participation, co-extension. One actor is made to act by many other actors, and thus action is always borrowed, distributed, suggested, influenced, linked, translated. Action is dislocated within a network of actions, of influences, of relations.

Modern humanism is reductionist, in Latour perspective, because it relegates action to a few powers, conceiving the rest of the world as mute forces. If this is what modern political mediation does, thus relegating many significant actors out of the political field, Latour's proposal for a "non-modern constitution" consists in recognising a right of tribune, a right of political participation and representation to non-human actors. A "parliament of things" in which a kind of hybrid management is exercised starting from the partial agreements that gradually emerge among heterogenous actors. If politics in Latour refers to the capacity to extend and foster practices of negotiation, the non-modern constitution constitutes a way for including new agency in constituted forms of policy, in order to cultivate better conditions of negotiation. In this way, new agencies are introduced and included within the constitutional project.

The need to include non-human entities in politics becomes even more urgent in times of ecological crisis. It is a matter, according to Latour, of reconstructing a realism of the Earthbound (Latour, 2018) capable of reconnecting politically with the material dimensions that enable the generation of terrestrial life: the necessity of recognising the fabric of material dependencies that make up a territory, a *milieu* of life. Latour resists to think Gaia (Latour, 2020) as a total organism because it is populated by different scales

and durations, and thus a territory of life can only be traced through an exercise of mapping in which different entities belong to and co-produce heterogeneous scales and durations. If we trace the elements that make life possible, we find a tangle of dependencies, implications and co-actions that are configured as more than local and less than global. The task of a terrestrial politics, which Latour contraposes to both a universalistic understanding of the global and a local folded in on itself, would be to cultivate roots and routes capable of relearning what could mean inhabiting a territory. A terrestrial politics comes with our capacity to reconnect ourselves to a past to reinvent and with our capacity to situate ourselves in a milieu. These are two fundamental dimensions for a terrestrial politics, a politics that refuses any localist and reactionary belonging. The politics of univocal globalisation has made a tabula rasa of these two dimensions, conceiving the territory as an effect of global forces and the past as something to be overcome. Instead, Latour proposes that we reconnect with the many dependencies that allow us to live in a territory – a fundamental exercise in trying to understand what we are willing to defend – and to conceive the past as inheritance, passage, resurgence, transmission, transformation, generation – a fundamental exercise in understanding what to pass into the present, and what is worth to reinvent (Latour & Schultz, 2022).

This terrestrial perspective is certainly a relevant conceptual tool for thinking a horizon of political ecology beyond, and against, the paradigms of univocal globalisation and regressive localism. Unfortunately, Latour seems incapable of bringing the investigation of the terrestrial into the ecological experiments and the multiple attempts to inhabit territories differently: recognising the trafficking of human-non-human relations is not enough for a politics of material regeneration, it matters how practices generate, or not, other entanglements and alternative politics of matter. Latour stops at the threshold of practices, unable to leave the political framework of modern representation. Nevertheless, in the current political landscape, in which the more than local and less than global processes of ecological transitions are trapped by these two fronts, the terrestrial perspective constitutes a precious lure for thinking (beyond Latour) a possible *third* political space, starting from the experimentation of processes of *reparative governance and ecological democracy* across different scales and geographies: alternative forms of agriculture and soil renewal, re-vegetation of urban spaces, indigenous ontologies, experimentation with bio-fuels and green chemistry, recuperation of traditional and indigenous systems of land use and land care, water and biodiversity conservation, production of alternative forms of energy, participatory practices of urban and regional ecological planning, to name just a few examples.

Du Bois (Du Bois, 1964) provides the conceptual framework for reparative justice in *Black Reconstruction in America* and Fanon (Fanon, 2004, 58-59) raises the question of reparations as part of anticolonial action. Reparations have a long history in postcolonial thought and practice and are also a defining moment of indigenous politics for decolonising settler colonial lands (Bacon, 2018; Whyte, 2018). Reparative governance reinstates a postcolonial and decolonial perspective into the governance of ecological transitions. Unlike “romanticised reparations” (Cadieux et al. 2019, 649), contemporary transition projects start from the assumption that there is no pure and original state to begin with: environmental destruction, colonial and racial injustices, geopolitical inequalities, and the eradication of other ways of life are deeply intertwined with ecological degradation (Cairns, 2003). Reparative governance relies thus on the framework of reparative justice that seeks to address the wrongs done to those who have suffered and, in most cases, are still suffering the ecological consequences rather than focussing solely on the punishment of the offenders (Almassi, 2017; Macleod, Beynon-Jones, & Toerien, 2017; Perez Murcia, 2014; Walker, 2010; White, 2016).

An ecological democratic political constituency addresses, involves, and implicates increasingly a very different set of actors, human as well as nonhuman, in its material workings. Such a reconfiguration of the political constitution is of course refused from the perspective of regressive nationalism or liberal green globalism, and it is impossible to be conceived through existing political institutions. In the sense of Rancière (Rancière, 1998), we could say that a constituent democracy (and a new institutional imaginary) emerges as those nonhumans and more-than-social actors enter the political scene only to reorder it, so that it can allow for them to act politically.

## The sympoietic game of the Cthulucene

How is it possible to think the constitutive nature of material forces and processes in ecological, social, technological and political life not as an inclusive politics of representation, but primarily as an instituent politics capable of inaugurating alternative politics of matter and more sustainable entanglements? This question brings us to explore a significant difference between the perspectives of Latour and Haraway.

For Donna Haraway, we live in hybrid worlds as a consequence of the fact that the modern chronotope, the specific ways in which time and space were conceived in modern science and culture, imploded in contemporary forms of life (Haraway, 1997).

The modern frame of meaning has imploded. And thus, the essentialist dividing lines that separated the natural from the cultural, the technical from the political, the human from the non-human, the material and the semiotic have imploded. An imaginary made up of delineated regions and stable boundaries is replaced by one in which fusions and condensations create hybrid worlds (Haraway, 1991). If Crutzen told us in the early 2000s “welcome to the Anthropocene” (Crutzen, 2002), in the same years Haraway told us “welcome to the implosion of anthropos, welcome in natureculture”. The continuous folding of everyday life, science and technology, something we have learned, with Haraway, to call technoscience, is the main material vector that brings us into the contemporary era. Technoscience disarticulates the time/imaginary called modernity, it marks a mutation of the historical narrative, “similar to the mutations that mark the difference between the sense of time in European medieval chronicles and the secular, cumulative salvation histories of modernity” (Haraway, 1997, 4). Technoscience overcomes modern distinctions between nature and society, subject and object, the natural and the artificial. In the midst of these implosions, new practices and configurations of knowledge emerge. Haraway helps us to glimpse in the end of the humanist culture and in the decentralisation of the human subject with respect to the material world, technologies and other species, a condition of possibility for escaping humanity in favour of richer forms of socio-material composition and multi-species terrestrial coexistence. Within these multiple implosions, Haraway explicitly tells us that the political difference to be made consists in not so much restoring the modern frame of meaning, but experimenting with forms of life that can assemble humans and more than humans in more sustainable ways.

In *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Haraway, 2016), a book dedicated to the unpredictability of kinship, Haraway gives us a series of practical notes for living, surviving and subverting the age of human exceptionalism. These are stories collected and recomposed in a game of strings, speculative fabulations, scientific theories, artistic performances, ethnographic studies, imprints of activism, reflections on bodies and technosciences, stories and landscapes whose contours are redefined daily from the plural and heterogeneous forms of living that are inhabiting these landscapes. Stories and facts in which being in the world and making worlds are always collective and multiple exercises, in which acting means, consciously or unconsciously, acting with other creatures: becoming with significant others. This is the Chthulucene, a space-time useful for staying in contact with what lives and dies, in barbaric times. The

companion species – the commensals of the earth – carry out forms of partial recovery, work the earth in the earth, create multi-species shelters and refugia, learn from each other from the problems they are facing.

The Chthulucene is also the name of a *third* narrative, third in relation to the narratives of the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene. The Burning Man, Haraway tells us, is the true icon of the Anthropocene: humans busy burning fossils and determined to create new fossils as quickly as possible. Haraway looks also at the stories of the Capitalocene because it was not the human species that created the conditions of colonialism, forced industrialisation, the nuclear age or the sixth mass extinction. The capitalist globalisation, and its socio-material implications, continue to be a fundamental object of her investigation. At the same time, the stories of the Chthulucene conceptualise the political ecology of our current historical moment in a very different way than the narratives of the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene. The symptom Anthropocene testifies to the indelible traces of human presence on planet Earth, positioning humans as equally the source of the problem and the key to the solution. In a similar pattern, Capitalocene anthropomorphises an economic system by assigning to it some form of human agency as if it is the system itself that is the subject of history. In both narratives the ecological is dependent on the social and humans are positioned as the culprits and, simultaneously, the guarantors of social and ecological peace. Within the framework of the Chthulucene and the imperative to “make with” something else emerges: human beings are in and with Earth, and the abiotic and biotic powers of the planet are the key actors of this narrative. Regenerating the biodiverse powers of Earth is the work and the sympoietic game of what Haraway calls the Chthulucene, an alternative grid which defines an era that should be dominated by multi-species responsibility and material, experimental justice.

What happens when human exceptionalism and utilitarian individualism of classical political and moral economy become unthinkable in the more advanced scientific disciplines? This fundamental question confronts us with a key concept in Haraway’s thought: sympoiesis. Taking seriously the invaluable work of biologist Lynn Margulis (Margulis, 2007), Haraway rearticulates the notion of sympoiesis and extends it in natureculture starting from an ontological primacy of relations over individual entities. Creatures do not precede their relations, quite the contrary. The tortuous and continuous mundane Earth making is not made up of pre-existing entities bound together by competitive interactions, so neoliberalism is a poor narrative.

We relate, know, think, world, and tell stories through and with other stories, worlds, knowledges, thinkings, yearnings. So do all the other critters of Terra, in all our bumptious diversity and category-breaking speciations and knottings. Other words for this might be materialism, evolution, ecology, sympoiesis, history, situated knowledges, cosmological performance, science art worldings, or animism, complete with all the contaminations and infections conjured by each of these terms. Critters are at stake in each other in every mixing and turning of the terran compost pile. We are compost, not posthuman; we inhabit the humusities, not the humanities. Philosophically and materially, I am a compostist, not a posthumanist. Critters – human and not – become-with each other, compose and decompose each other, in every scale and register of time and stuff in sympoietic tangling, in ecological evolutionary developmental earthly worlding and unworldling. (Haraway, 2016, 97)

Haraway's thought constitutes an invaluable contribution for thinking a materialism capable of staying with the challenges of political ecology, a materialism that allows us to think processes of ecological regeneration not only as a social process. We are facing the sixth mass extinction. The productivism of globalisation has been developed through a colonial politics of matter. Certain humans and certain non-humans have been composed in unsustainable ways. The consequences are in our soil, air, water, within us and around us. The threshold of ecological sustainability has been crossed. We need other politics of matter: alternative forms of coexistence between species, inorganic substances and artefacts (Ghelfi & Papadopoulos, 2021). I find this *alternative* material politics in a myriad of contemporary environmental and ecological movements that, starting from specific practices and contexts, are inventing other modes of existence by experimenting with forms of interaction that actively involved the significant presence of human and more-than-human entities. By inventing ways of relating between heterogeneous elements, by creating ecologies of existence rich and responsible enough to be able to cultivate mundane prosperity, these movements invent practices of "making with" within a politics of everyday life. From ecological and peasant movements to practices of solidarity for the right to health, from permaculture to occupied factories, from feminist and queer movements to indigenous resistance, a central point of contemporary political ecology consists in the experimentation of other ways of relating amongst people, plants, humans and soil, technologies and humans (Ghelfi & Papadopoulos, 2023). If an instituent politics refers first of all to the capacity to practice material transformations,

this capacity to act cannot be defined as a human agency or as a universal to be realised. On the contrary, a politics of matter is sustained by a situated capacity to ‘make with’ others, human and more than human. If historical materialism has been characterised by an extraordinary ability to hold materialism and activism together around the knot of class struggle, the materialism that emerges from the Chthulucene reactivates a relation between materialism and activism. But rather than starting from a regime of intelligibility of politics within the social sphere of production, it locates politics in the cosmos, in the scientific laboratory, in the commune, in the farm and the field, in the hackerspace and in the many other places where we are learning, in times of ecological crisis, to decolonise our relationship with the materiality of life.

## The intrusions of Gaia

The traces of the ecological conflict are everywhere, while the chemical, biological and geophysical modifications of the Earth are leading to increasingly ungovernable consequences. As Crutzen argues, we live in “terra incognita” (Crutzen, 2002). This is the new ecological condition (Ghelfi, 2022a). This condition of unpredictability forces us to be with the many “intrusions of Gaia” (Stengers, 2017): the uncomfortable truth that ecological crises are part of our present and our future. Gaia is the name of a Greek mythological deity who shows a firm indifference to the effects of her actions: Gaia does not act to punish anyone or to restore justice. She acts, plain and simple. Gaia’s intrusions interrupt any idea of historical progress, geocentric humanism, passive nature.

In the time of Gaia’s intrusions Isabelle Stengers defines political ecology as the politicisation of existing problematics in relation to the material processes that inhabit the world: “No issue, no politics”. And more specifically, she tells us that the ecological question has to do with the frictions that the intrusions of Gaia are determining. In order to stay with such frictions, Stengers suggests a relationship between problems and solutions in which the emphasis is on the ability of a common problem and a matter of common interest to capture the attention of different actors. But here what is common is not a common property or a substance, rather it is what calls different actors into play, what forces them to think, to invent, to act in concert depending on each other. The common activated by an ‘acting with’ is what emerges between us, what in various ways challenges us, what forces us to think and act. The common, then, is what reactivates a collective capacity of composition between different actors,

who compose themselves by refusing the presence of an external authority, of a moral arbiter. This notion of ecological composition marks a clear discontinuity with an idea of politics in which agreement and unity are based on a supposed common nature. In contrast, Stengers is inviting us to go slow, and slowly compose common worlds and ecologies of existence. As the etymology of the word *interest* suggests, what is interesting is what emerges between us, what forces us to think with others, what extends our rationalities, what puts us in touch with the consequences of something that is happening.

The word cosmopolitics (Stengers, 2005) signals the need, in the new ecological condition, of the re-invention of the political, a precious term. The cosmos signals not the presence of a theory of the cosmos that grounds cosmopolitics, but the focus on an *indeterminacy* that makes politics possible. Only by placing this element of indeterminacy at the beginning of politics is it possible to enter in cosmopolitics, and in the experimentation of possible modes of coexistence, without hierarchies, between modern and nonmodern cultures. Stengers suggests resisting the temptation to think politics as a plan for a “good common world”, that is, to turn a situated practice of which we are particularly proud into a general key: a neutral universality that is good for everyone in every situation. His proposal is not aimed at providing us with a list of procedures that can capture a definition of what is good in a good common world, rather the implicit idea implied in her enigmatic cosmos suggests precisely that we should slow down, creating a space of hesitation about what it means to say *good*. The cosmos is not an object of representation, but it refers to an unknown, “the unknown constituted by these multiple, divergent worlds, and the articulations of which they could eventually be capable” (Stengers, 2005, 996). Stengers’ proposal works as a lure for creating forms of self-regulation: an ethics capable of facilitating the experimental invention of reciprocal constraints in collective action. This ethical-political proposal is aimed at supporting our attempts not to surrender to what has caused Gaiia’s intrusions, and to reactivate our capacity to pay attention.

In the first instance, we must pay attention to what we depend on because humans depend on something larger than themselves, on a chain of susceptible forces with which, nevertheless, we must compose. The collective re-appropriation of the capacity to pay attention is, after all, what Stengers has always been concerned with: the experimental nature of scientific practices, the gathering around “common causes” and the enterprise of risk-taking are examples, some of the many possible ways for regaining a sense of what we are doing. A meaning that is always situated, precarious, vulnerable, linked to

the invention of practical tools, to the fabrication of *dispositives*. The culture of political dispositives is a pharmacological affair. Medicines, like any artifice, can be both remedy and poison. And we must reckon with the ambiguity that every pragmatics of political construction brings with it. Times have changed: teleologies of salvation, epic heroism and the truths of utopia do not belong to the pharmakon culture. The commoners, those who gather around “common causes”, agree with prudence, learn to value, act, feel and think with others: “multiplicity of gatherings around what forces thinking and imagining together, around common causes, none of which has the power to determine the others, but each one of which requires that the others also receive the power of causing to think and imagine those that they gather together” (Stengers, 2015, 94).

This ethical-political approach is a precious tool for nurturing processes of transversal alliances, compositions and coalitions amongst divergent singularities and socio-ecological movements in the time of the intrusions of Gaia. Stengers’ ecology of practices suggests ways in which we can rally around what we depend on: a river, a forest, a school, a health centre, a neighbourhood, a farm. She invites us to think about how situations can be transformed if those who suffer find techniques and pragmatics to think and act together. It is not just a matter of opposing a refusal or to pull the handbrake, but of working practically on the construction of material alternatives capable of allowing something from the past to make room for itself, to reinvent itself in the present. In her *In Catastrophic Times. Resisting the Coming Barbarism* (Stengers, 2015) she focuses on a political event: the anti-GMO resistance movement in Europe and its ability to create a wide network of alliances and to generate around this partial victory a new field of visibility capable of questioning what the agriculture of modernisation has become. The agriculture of Progress, the one that was able to put traditional seeds and small farmers out of business, no longer appeared so “rational” after this battle. On the contrary, a set of farming techniques, ways of life, ecological concerns and food cultures (Ghelfi, 2022b) that were supposed to belong to a peasant past destined to pass away, began to emerge for what they are: material alternatives in the present.

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