

POTATO

12 October 2019

THE STORY THAT BEGINS IN ADAPAZARI

Today at the centre are food, agriculture, seed and livestock policies, food sovereignty. The burden that industrial agriculture places on life and the planet, the commodification of food, our disconnection from food production processes, economic hardship and migration – and against these, the alternative models being formed, the resistance of traditional agriculture, the transmission of knowledge between generations. The potato holds all of these conversations together.

A farmer takes the stage – having rushed here, from the village by taxi, from the taxi on foot, running two stops to arrive in time. "When you say potato, so many things come to mind," they begin. The potato was first planted in Turkey in Adapazari and this farmer's childhood was spent there. They remember the potatoes: not very handsome, a little crooked, shapeless, but you'd light a fire, bury them in the ash, sprinkle salt on top, and eat them. The flavour came not from the shape but from the soil.

But most of those potatoes are gone now. Industrial agriculture swept away local varieties. Corporate seeds produce a single standard product – it is no coincidence that all the potatoes in the supermarket are the same size; it is the result of a standardisation policy. Irregular potatoes, amor potatoes remain outside the market. As the genetic pool narrows, resistance to diseases weakens too – dependency on a single variety is a recipe for famine.

The farmer speaks of a seed-sorting machine – a simple implement, arrived in sixteen days, now even village councils are beginning to acquire them. Three to four, sometimes six to seven different seed varieties come out of a single seed. Yields increased by 30–35 percent with local seeds. And that increase began to shatter farmers' misconception that "local seed is unproductive." Then came continuous training sessions, volunteer specialists – four to five training sessions a year, without ever tiring.

"We were operating from a misled perspective. They said corporate seed was better. We started using the machine, and yields with local seeds exploded."

THE METAPHORS OF THE IRREGULAR: THE MATERIALITY OF THE POTATO

The second voice belongs to an artist and opens an entirely different side of the potato: its materiality. They explain that plastic can be made from potato starch. A British artist's eccentric project: tried to build a toaster from scratch – a toaster has four hundred parts, steel, copper, mica, plastic. They cast the plastic from potato starch, but left it overnight to dry and it was eaten by snails. Even failure carries meaning: nature maintains its own cycle no matter what humans do. This chemical transformation resembles agriculture, says the artist – arranging polymers is like arranging soil in rows, also a drive for control. Vinegar enters between them like a farmer removing unwanted weeds from their field, ridding it of disordered polymers; glycerin seeps between the polymers like water seeping into soil, joining and elasticising them. The artist tried this at home – produced plastic in the kitchen with water, white vinegar, glycerin and potato starch. But the potato's real story lies in its materiality: a plant that stands out with its permanence – it can be stored for four to five months in darkness without moisture, a long lifespan compared to other vegetables. Now that it transforms into bioplastic it stands out with its impermanence: it decomposes in nature within two months. From permanence to impermanence – the potato plays with time itself.

Agnès Varda's 2000 film "The Gleaners and I" enters this discussion. Varda followed socially marginalised people who gathered irregular produce left in the field after the harvest had been collected — inspired by Jean-François Millet's 1857 painting of gleaners. Heart-shaped potatoes became Varda's signature: those falling outside order, growing at two ends, a metaphor for different forms of life. Varda herself is irregular: she transitioned to contemporary art at a very advanced age, went to the Venice Biennial in a potato costume saying "who will come to an exhibition at this age," exhibiting her installation "Patatutopia." After Varda's death in 2019 heart-shaped potatoes are left at her grave instead of flowers — an artist's legacy lives on through a tuber plant.

"They look at the potato and say it causes leprosy. It is not even in the Bible. Moreover it grows underground — suspicious. But when famine comes, there is no other option."

A WORLD HISTORY ON THE TRAIL OF THE POTATO

The third presentation suddenly expands the table — it traverses world history on the trail of the potato. A researcher begins with the silver mines of South America: the Spanish built an empire with the silver they extracted from Potosí, but on the same ships they also transported the potato to Europe. In Europe the potato was initially rejected — for three reasons: it is not in the Bible (sin circulates), it being a plant that grows underground arouses suspicion, and its tuberous structure creates fear of leprosy. The method of acquiring knowledge at the time worked by analogy — if walnut resembles the brain, it is good for the brain. What does the potato resemble? Leprosy. As Foucault described, it was only in the eighteenth century that people began saying "perhaps that is not how this works." But wars and famines make potato acceptance necessary.

The Protestant-Catholic wars devastated Europe, hunger appeared, people were compelled to eat potatoes. And one characteristic of the potato changes everything: intense calories in a small area. It does not compete with wheat — while wheat grows in wet, fertile land, the potato grows in mountain peaks that have never been used before, in rocky terrain, in the "only a cow could survive here" places of Ireland. In every geography it enters, a population explosion begins: Ireland, Germany, sweet potato in China — every society using the potato grows rapidly. This population growth makes colonialism possible: England is not only seizing land, it is also exporting its people — to Australia, New Zealand, America. Behind its killing of the indigenous peoples there and replacing them with its own population lies the calorie of the potato. The researcher adds "I am simplifying a little, describing it as if there were a single cause" but makes a strong argument: the explosion points of world population coincide with the spread map of the potato.

"If we are going to talk about climate change, we need to talk about this too, in one respect. The potato changed world history — it looks resilient and innocent, but it is a presence pregnant with changing our lives."

A voice recalls the concept of "capitalocene": not the anthropocene but an era originating from capitalism. The chain connecting the potato to colonialism, colonialism to industrial agriculture, industrial agriculture to the climate crisis lies precisely within this concept.

BOĞATEPE: ANOTHER LIFE IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

The fourth voice comes from the village of Boğatepe in Kars and has brought a real gift to the hall: boiled Kars potatoes and local cheeses. Food sovereignty ceases to be an abstract concept and becomes an experience touching the palate — the hall eats, tastes, smells. "While eating this potato, what happens? Think of the previous presentation," someone says. The farmer questions the real reason for rural flight: it seems economic but beneath it lies the weakening of social life, the loss of a sense of belonging. People cannot see the value in the place where they were born — six hundred plant varieties were all considered "weeds," until botanical studies revealed each one's identity.

"Although what triggers migration seems to be economic, the underlying fundamental reason is the weakening of social life. The weakening of a sense of belonging."

A different model has been established in Boğatepe. Botanical and ethnobotanical studies have been conducted – over 600 plant varieties have been discovered in the region, all considered "weeds," but each has an identity, a field of use, a utility. Traditional knowledge called "old wives' methods" has been combined with university knowledge. Local cheese production has been revitalised. Anatolian animal breeds are being protected: the Eastern Anatolian Red bee, the Anatolian Grey cattle – one of the world's fundamental gene sources for cattle breeds – the Caucasian Smoke, the Çıldır Black. Turkey's only ecomuseum has been established in Boğatepe: it is the Turkish branch of a movement that says "I will live my culture" against the pressure of industrialisation on local production cultures after the 1950s. There are 573 ecomuseums in the world, one in Turkey.

In the urban-rural fusion programme, children from the city bake bread in the village, milk cows, make cheese. A local woman told: "We see no other face on this mountain except our own. When you come, it is a great thing for us. Come once a week, why not. But don't come too often – don't take away your own time." Solidarity tourism: not a consuming but a producing tourist, participating in farm work for a week, sowing, sharing common labour. Agricultural school students come from Belgium, couples come from various countries.

The food law that came out in 2005 removed local cheeses from shelves. Large supermarkets had the law enacted: local products get a maximum five percent shelf space. But citizens resisted – they stopped buses on the roads and inspected the products in their luggage. People came in the most luxurious vehicles to buy these products. A message to the market: "However much you ban, we want flavours and nutritious food from Anatolia's clean soils." Today in Istanbul there are 973 local, organic, traditional product sales points. These have filled the place of closed neighbourhood grocers.

UNDERGROUND STARS: A POETIC CLOSING

Two performances open the poetic dimension of the potato. Three members of a collective wrote independent texts and produced videos in three different cities – brought together without interfering with each other, trusting each other's sensibility. The continuation of their previous collective work on melon: processing a fruit or vegetable as both metaphor and reality. Underground and above-ground, root and star, seed and transformation interweave: "Potatoes are both stars and plants. Plants are both root and organism." A warning from Demeter arrives: "The family tree has branched too much. Is the life you live above ground in direct proportion to finding the stars underground?"

"Let us not be extinguished by multiplying. Let us not surrender by warming. If we are to die, let us die like stars. With the air of a supernova."

Another performance – a group of four – has built stories around the potato: a housewife serves the family, a soldier serves the state and serves a potato-peeling punishment, a pope serves religion and bans the potato. Each character is part of a service relation, the potato at the centre of each: innocent and diabolical, permanent and transient, underground and above-ground. The performer also narrates their own journey: after talking about the potato at the first birbuçuk meeting, they decided to combine poetry and video, to extract story from research.

At the closing Q&A a farmer takes the floor and the hall is briefly stilled: "I remembered once more in this process that what we do, small-scale farming, is a craft – and that at its essence a craft is also an art." The two living things most successful at perpetuating their lineage are wheat and potato – and we came together around two of them, says another voice, we too are around them, are you aware? The point where art meets real life enables us to dream, we know we cannot go anywhere without dreaming. The potato session connects the artist to the farmer, the farmer to the researcher, the researcher to the performer. The boiled Kars potato on the table has gone cold but its taste remains in the hall.