



Asparagus ontology: familiar responses in exceptional times

Autorin: Agnieszka Pasięka

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In the course of a session in early May of my “zoominar” on neo-nationalism and the far right titled “Making strangers,” my very international group of students and I were discussing the 2015 refugee crisis. We talked about demands to close borders and debates about the presumed competition migrants meant for low-skilled workers. This led promptly to a discussion of the plight of Eastern European workers who, despite the pandemic and bans on travel, were brought to Germany and Austria to harvest asparagus, a staple item in the spring menu.ⁱ

“But what is asparagus?” a student from China asked. A French student vanished from the screen for a moment, before re-appearing with a bunch of green stalks and a summary of the best (French) way to prepare them. An Austrian came up with a different recipe and added that her grandfather used to grow asparagus in his garden. From her own experience, she felt able to tell the group why “many spoiled Austrian kids” were reluctant to undertake the demanding work of harvesting asparagus. Other Austrian students eagerly engaged in the discussion on the role asparagus played in their cuisine, frequently injecting the adjective “typical.” One suggested that we could reflect on asparagus along the lines proposed by Nancy Ries in her article on “potato ontology” (2009), in which she demonstrated the centrality of potatoes for Russian society and economy.ⁱⁱ No one would claim that asparagus was crucial for “surviving” the pandemic as potatoes were in postsocialist Russia. But now as then food provides a lens for grasping links between consumption, stratification, economic relations, and a society’s self-image. Our discussion of “national cuisine” brought us back eventually to the session’s main theme: what it means to be “typically” Dutch, Brazilian or Greek, how assumptions regarding “intrinsic” national values connect with processes of exclusion, and how boundary-making practices are manipulated by right-wing nationalists.

The Covid-19 pandemic has provided my seminar with much food for thought beyond the asparagus scandals. We discussed far-right conspiracy theories, the invocation of human

rights discourses to protest the lock-down, and campaigns against the EU. The pandemic reinforced the main message I have been trying to convey to the students all along: that understanding the far right depends on grasping the broader societal context in which nationalist ideas thrive. The aim has been to show that, rather than accepting the narrative of far-right “mainstreaming,” it is necessary to recognize multi-directional transfers of “exclusionary,” “misogynist,” and “anti-egalitarian” attitudes.

Seen in this light, recent press articles reporting (in the usual alarmist manner) right-wing populist responses to the ongoing crisis seem to overlook the fact that the vast majority of corona-related measures have been nationalist in character. The immediate closure of internal as well as external EU borders was predicated on fear of “outsiders.” There was an absolute reluctance to think beyond the idea of the nation-state, e. g. by focusing on hard-hit regions (such as the Italian-Austrian border regions from which the virus actually spread). Although the notion of “solidarity” was later deployed more frequently, debates continue to demonstrate “nation-first” attitudes.

The crisis has revealed that everyday or “banal” nationalism is much more widespread in Europe than we like to think. Many liberal people I know in Austria are very concerned (and rightly so) about the situation in Eastern Europe, where leaders like Viktor Orbán and Jarosław Kaczyński have exploited the emergency to strengthen their power. Yet the very same liberals completely ignore the fact that the Austrian Chancellor, Sebastian Kurz, opens his speeches to the locked-down population with “Dear Austrian women and men” (“*Liebe Österreicherinnen und Österreicher*”), apparently oblivious to the fact that roughly 20% of the population has a foreign background and are not citizens (in Vienna *circa* 40%). What matters here is not whether this is done on purpose or not, but the fact that this exclusionary way of addressing the population “fighting together against the pandemic” is treated as normal and passes unnoticed. It is even more problematic if we consider that “foreigners” have contributed enormously to rendering life under the pandemic safe for the rest of the population, since they are over-represented not only among nurses – also “brought” from Eastern Europe in May – but also among other groups of “essential workers.” In my web-seminar, we discussed many forms of everyday exclusionary practice. A student from Canada talked about the hostile looks Asian-Americans get on the streets of Montreal, where she had returned due to the pandemic, and a colleague from China told us how fed up he was with hearing about the “*Chinese virus*.” Discourses about the virus and a potential cure indicate that both “have” a nationality: attempts to produce a vaccine are also marked by nationalist competition. In this context, high-flown statements about the “common lot of humanity” sound rather cynical.

In her elaboration of “potato ontology,” Nancy Ries says that “both physically and ideologically, potato is a critical medium of exchange, reciprocity, collaborating, and mutual support, and thus

an elemental force of social connection, cohesion, and communication. And yet two steps down the path, potato also scores the ground of social exclusion, the laborious desperation of being cut off" (2009: 203). I believe these words apply equally well to "asparagus ontology," and the politics of labour it represents. Asparagus draws attention to the plight of thousands of desperate workers who signed up to harvest it, and the double standards regarding health, safety and "labour mobility" of the countries which "invited" them. The asparagus-corona-story is a lens through which to investigate the complex intersection between nationalist attachments, economic imperatives, and transnational inequalities. Despite the endless refrains about the "dramatic changes" the COVID-19 pandemic is bringing about, what we are actually observing is rather the intensification of what we've long known to be true.ⁱⁱⁱ

Notes

ⁱ See the article in *Der Spiegel*: <https://www.spiegel.de/wirtschaft/bad-krozingen-tod-eines-spargel-helfers-mit-corona-ein-leben-fuer-den-spargel-a-ff21540c-8fa9-429d-b69d-0a54cc5c3462>

See also the blogpost by Chris Hann 'The digital home office: householding revisited': <https://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/2020/the-digital-home-office-householding-revisited/>

ⁱⁱ Nancy Ries (2009). 'Potato Ontology: Surviving Postsocialism in Russia'. *Cultural Anthropology*, 24(2), 181-212.

ⁱⁱⁱ See also the blogpost by Sylvia Terpe 'Corona Just Highlights the Problems a Society Already Has': https://www.eth.mpg.de/5417351/blog_2020_04_06_01