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When Terroir Lost the Plot

On Re-grounding Wine

by *Andrea Pavoni*

Terroir lost the plot when its speculative, relational potential has been frozen into a *dispositif* that reduces soil to inert substrate, land to a legally coded space of exception, and place to a socio-cultural fetish tied to identity, hierarchy and nationalist localism. In the context of planetary urban-rural transformations and soil crisis, this paper reframes terroir as an emergent *agencement* of soil, land and place, whose multispecies aliveness exceeds both protectionist appellation regimes and the «democratic», market-led critique that claims to liberate wine from tradition. Focusing on Natural Wine as a heterogeneous but movement-like field, the paper argues that its minimal-intervention ethos articulates an *anarchic critique* of terroir through three operations: reanimating soils, unarchiving land and trans-localising place. Natural Wine protocols, practices and participatory forms of verification thus decouple terroir from static origin, repositioning it as a grounded, more-than-human normativity and a site for alternative political-ecological value.

Keywords: Natural Wine, Terroir, Anarchism, Soil, Value.

Terroir lost the plot

In the XIV volume of Pierre Larousse's *Grand Dictionnaire Universel du XIXe siècle* (1866), terroir is defined as «the earth considered from the point of view of agriculture» (in Trubek 2008, xv). In the light of the troubling problematisation this point of view has undergone with the advent of the Anthropocene, we may reframe this definition, understanding wine as a practice that takes place in the relationship of terroir and earth, increasingly encountering the *planet* in the process (cf. Chakrabarty 2019)¹. Terroir, with its relational, ecological and more than human connotations, does potentially express a complex and lively multispecies entanglement that resonates with contemporary speculative reflections and practices in political ecology and beyond (cf. West 2022). Yet, its current articulation undermines such potential, turning the terroir into a sort of Foucauldian *dispositif* that conceals and suppresses its political and ontological conditions of emergence. At the same time, while the protectionist rhetoric of terroir discourse

¹ «Thinking takes place in the relationship of territory and earth» (Deleuze and Guattari [1991] 1994, 85).

seemingly pits it against the menacing, agro-industrial forces of global capitalism, both eventually share, as we are to see, the same ontological and epistemological foundations. Today, terroir appears a politically, epistemologically and culturally dubious concept – one that has grown increasingly entangled with relations of power, nationalist rhetorics and anachronistic localism. Over time, it has lost its speculative and strategic potential, becoming, in effect, an ever «less anchored “floating signifier” at the mercy of commercial enterprise and capital gain» (Howland and Dutton 2020, 16). Before the environmental, normative and cultural challenges of the Anthropocene, then, terroir appears as blatantly inadequate. The concept must not be dismissed outright, however. A different critique is needed – one that confronts its limitations without yielding to neoliberal and nationalist ideologies. This is precisely what the discourse of Natural Wine (NW) promises, and what this text sets out to contend.

In the first section, I outline the broader theoretical ground from which this inquiry emerges. The second section introduces what I call the *terroir dispositif*, unpacking the threefold reductionism through which it is commonly articulated: soil, reduced to inert matter; land, fixed within a legal space of exception; and place, fetishised as an anthropocentric, socio-cultural construct. The third section surveys the main critiques of terroir—political, epistemological and cultural. The fourth turns to, and introduces, NW. Finally, the fifth develops the argument that NW advances an «anarchic critique» of conventional terroir through three operations: *reanimating* its soils, *unarchiving* its land and *trans-localising* its place. While, as I briefly remark in the conclusion, the field of NW is far from being homogeneous, coherent or free from contradictions, its notion of terroir – along with the epistemological, normative and practical suggestions it harbours – offers a promising impulse for the urgent task of developing ecological imaginaries that be alternative to the ontological, normative and aesthetic presuppositions of Anthropocene realism (Adamson 2015).

Wine planet

As critical geography has amply shown, before the scale, speed and abstraction of the geopolitical, financial, economic, technological, climatic and aesthetic flows feeding planetary processes, the local scale of the site has become an epistemologically elusive and politically suspicious perspective. Following Reza Negarestani (2015, 227),

Localism is not the answer to problems at the level of the local precisely because it cannot adequately examine the situatedness of a local domain within a global structure, its points of liaison with other local domains and so forth. Localism is a negatively abstract appeal to the local that is incap-

ble of analyzing those non-local aspects which determines the specificity of local problem.

That does not mean the «local» dimension must be abandoned. It is the relation between local and global – and their presupposed opposition – that demands reconsideration. «The harder we work the earth in our increasing quest for profit and power, the more we encounter the planet», writes Dipesh Chakrabarty. «To encounter the planet – he continues – is to encounter something that is the condition of human existence and yet profoundly indifferent to that existence» (2019, 4). How to deal, attend, perhaps attune to such indifference? The planetary, William Connolly writes, is to be understood as «the combination of capitalist processes and the amplifiers in nonhuman geological forces» (quoted in Chakrabarty 2019, 23-24). On the one hand, urbanisation becomes planetary by operationalising «places, territories and landscapes, often located far beyond the dense population centers, to support the everyday activities and socioeconomic dynamics of urban life» (Brenner and Schmid 2015, 1673). On the other hand, ruralisation becomes planetary as well, as «the processual, more-than-residual, and geographically variegated socio-spatial dynamics of contemporary human investments in and engagements with rural land, livelihoods, and lifestyles» (Gillen *et al.* 2022, 188). In this context, the configuration of human-environment interactions at the «rural» end of urban-rural relations appears as particularly «critical to addressing planetary crises, from climate change to biodiversity loss, and from food security to energy sustainability» (Wang *et al.* 2024, 3), including the cultivation of alternative, human-soil imaginaries (Salazar *et al.* 2020).

Three aspects are particularly relevant for our purposes. First, the dramatic global soil crisis in which we are, resulting from the exploitative reduction of soil to an inert resource for human use and extraction, with the systematic concealment, poisoning and depletion of its ecological liveness (FAO 2021). Second, the so-called «global land rush» – a wave of transnational farmland acquisitions triggered by the 2008 financial crisis – that has played a pivotal role in exacerbating the current soil crisis. This phenomenon has simultaneously drawn renewed scholarly and political attention to land's multiple dimensions: its material uses, economic valuations and the complex assemblage of technical, juridical and discursive apparatuses that render land legible and «available» for global capital flows (Li 2014). Third, the alternative «rural futures» that are being theorised and practiced by farmers, foresters, rural communities and activists worldwide, intersecting «new ecological cultures of care for the non-human world» (Puig de la Bellacasa 2019, 392) with alternative modes of producing, distributing and consuming food (Goodman *et al.* 2012). Wine, a quintessentially rural activity deeply rooted within urban economy, aesthetic and culture, provides an intriguing context to explore this complex configuration.

The terroir *dispositif*

De-essentialising terroir, that is, resisting to the temptation to answer that recurring question about what a terroir is, requires a genealogical sensibility. It means disturbing and fragmenting its presupposed unity, showing the plurality of discourses and power relations that have led to its current understanding². It means, in other words, moving from geology to genealogy, circumventing the search of a metaphysical origin [*Ursprung*] in order to highlight a historical provenance [*Herkunft*] – a particularly adequate strategy for a concept that is by definition obsessed with «origin». *Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée. Denominazione di Origine Controllata. Protected Designation of Origin*. Through its legal infrastructure, the notion of terroir has been tied to a geo-climatic and cultural *origin*, fixed in space and time, an object «out there» that is supposedly *expressed* by skilled winemakers, *protected* by official institutions and *evaluated* by professional tasters. As a result, terroir has been frozen and naturalised into a heterogeneous ensemble of discourses, institutions, regulatory decisions, scientific statements, ideological assumptions, networks of privilege, aesthetic preferences and power relations – a *dispositif*, to use Michel Foucault's definition, that awaits deconstruction³. A host of brilliant genealogies have done so, by retracing the birth of terroir to the need to protect producers and consumers from adulterations and frauds, to challenge the power of wine merchants, to preserve the privileged status quo and so on (Moran 1993; Barker *et al.* 2001; Barham 2003; Jacquet and Laferté 2005; Trubek 2008; Goldberg 2011; Unwin 2022).

While I point the reader to these works for a comprehensive overview, my effort here is less genealogical than conceptual. Rather than retracing the unfolding of the contemporary «terroir *dispositif*», I disinter the three concepts that, I argue, compose its triangular structure, each of them depending on a specific characterisation and reductionism of terroir: soil, land and place.

First: soil. Traditionally, soil has been considered the minimal approximation to the notion of terroir: a combination of minerals, exposition and climate determining a wine's distinctive characteristics (Wilson 1998). While recently the determinist connotation of this understanding has been questioned, the underlining soil imaginary that fed it has remained unchallenged. Namely, the «high modernist», productionist vision of soil as inert, passive and objectified resource at the disposal of human intervention (Thompson 1995; Scott 1998). Within capi-

² Genealogy «disturbs what was previously considered immobile; it fragments what was thought unified; it shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself» (Foucault [1971] 1980, 147).

³ In his canonical definition, Foucault defines a *dispositif* as «a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions – in short, the said as much as the unsaid. The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements» (Foucault [1971] 1980, 194).

talism, «natural processes» are framed as potential limitations to capital's process of value-extraction (Marx 1885). In the 20th century, technology, chemistry, microbiology and mechanisation have provided various ways to decrease the dependence of agriculture to the «sway of natural processes», as Karl Marx put it, including permitting a gradual «liberation» and «emancipation» of wine from the shackles of environmental constraints (Van Aken 2014, 167). Fertilisers and pesticides limited the effect of contingencies such as pests, weather, diseases, while devitalising the soil in the process. Sulphur dioxide «silenced» wine (Ladrey 1863, 219-221; Divol *et al.* 2012) and made it comply to «human temporalities and designs» (Mariani 2023, 71), increasing its ageing – and thus valorisation – potential by filtering out the microorganisms inhabiting its liquid. Commercial yeast strains, developed in 1890s and popularised after the Second World War, colonised terroir by substituting indigenous yeasts with predictable, engineered alternatives (cf. Furness 2022). Today, a wide variety of techniques and technologies are applied in the vineyard and in the cellar to shape the terroir into the desired outcome, by limiting the unpredictable effects of soil's vitality.

Second: land. «What is land?», asks Tania Murray Li, answering that that depends on what is each time assumed to mean and value, which in turn rests on a complex process involving «diverse actors, including villagers, scientists, investors, legal experts and government officials. Such actors have distinct views on what land is (its ontology), what it can or should do (its affordances), and how humans should interact with it» (Li 2014, 590). Partly, these views can be about flattening the land *qua* soil into an inert matter available to human use. Partly, they can be about generating new ways for land to be culturally, economically and financially consumed *qua* resource (cf. Blomley 2013)⁴. Assembling land into a resource requires disassembling it first, though: a process of simplification aimed at «dismembering it» into elements that are more amenable to be inserted in processes of valorisation (cf. Scott 1998, 21). Monoculture is an obvious case in point. Significantly, dismembering also functions as a temporal process, notably «discounting», the process according to which «the value of capital at any instant is derived from the value of the future income which that capital is expected to yield» (Fisher 1906, 188). Through discounting, land is «defined not through its physical properties, but through its valuation, which is entirely dependent on the future flows that it produces» (Doganova 2024, 25), according to the global juridical, political and financial infrastructures that such flows articulate. The result is a radical deterritorialisation, the dismembering, dissolution and prolongation of land towards «the flows of costs and revenues or benefits that [it is] likely to generate in the future» (ivi, 8).

⁴ «What we call a resource», Li continues, «is a provisional assemblage of heterogenous elements including material substances, technologies, discourses and practices» (Li 2014, 589)

As it is known, wine terroir is normally organised via Protected Designations of Origin [PDOs], geographical indications that codify terroir into the specific articulation of the geography, grapes, terrain and techniques that define a given appellation⁵. PDOs are enforced via controls at wineries and evaluated via tasting commissions. To many, they are a force of resistance against the agro-industrial deterritorialisation, collective property rights that provide the «necessary means of resisting the homogenization, industrialization, and commodification that characterise the food system» (Bowen and de Master 2011, 81). They do so, however, at the cost of freezing terroir into an origin that is «unable to account for the dynamism and unpredictable nature of craft production» (Abbots 2018). PDOs, in fact, enact a peculiar form of discounting, locking terroir to an «authentic» past that is to be iteratively reproduced in the future, by means of repressing present variation: stability, reliability and consistency are key for wine valorisation. This is done: first, by allowing a host of techniques and technologies that are directly aimed at increasing stability by reducing the living potential of terroir, repressing variation and impeding certain entities from being counted, that is, discounting them⁶; second, by normatively shaping winemaking practice into a space of exception through which terroir is included *qua* legal protocols while excluded *qua* lively excess (cf. Agamben [1988] 2017, 9-10). The result is naturalising terroir by obscuring the political conditions of its constitution, the power relations that sustain it and the more than human entanglements that produce it (Pavoni 2020); third, by enforcing the normative framework via policing winemaking practices and tasting evaluation. I do not intend to demonise these practices here, to be sure, but rather to trace their common kinship vis-à-vis dominant, high modernist epistemologies, according to which winemaking and tasting are framed as acts of mastery performed by expert subjects (winemakers, oenologists, sommeliers) on an object (terroir) that is both pre-emptively assumed as passive and violently reduced to passivity.

Third: place. In its cultural geographical connotation, place is the locus where human narratives and material environments intertwine, a dense reservoir of belonging, representation, lived experience and meaning (Relph 1976; Tuan 1977). Contemporary thought has for long time flirted with an anthropological understanding of place based on «the relation between locale and meaning, internal to the boundaries of physical contiguity» (Osborne 2001, 188). A pacific, anthro-

⁵ Geographical indications have been defined in the 1994 General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) as the indication of a link between a good and a location. Appellation laws are stricter, since they also concern authorised techniques, grape varieties, maximum yields and so on (Moran 1993, 697; Barham 2003).

⁶ Doganova: «discounting impedes certain entities from being counted – it literally *dis-counts* them» (2024, 61).

pocentric, static *here*, simplistically opposed to the placelessness of the global. In this common usage, as Matthew Poole (2015, 93) helpfully summarises, place is

designated by a particular set of sociocultural forces, which are of interest to human subjects and which are valued according to such human subjective investments in and as that particular set of intensities, competencies, aptitudes constituting the place. We can call these investments «local» in that they are empirically bound to the given perceiving and feeling human subjectivities at any given time and location.

This is the vision of place that characterises terroir, especially after the 1990s «return to terroir», which could be defined, as Peter Howland and Jacqueline Dutton do (2020, 13), as «a reactionary measure against the encroachment of New World winemaking technology and practices in the 1970s and 1980s». *Returning* to terroir, in this context, has meant to expand its understanding of terroir beyond merely geo-climatic connotations, assuming it also as a socio-cultural place, where shared practices, meanings and traditions, sedimented through habit, form an intangible heritage to be valorised and protected (Demossier 2000; Gade 2004; Bérard and Marchenay 2008). The assumption informing this discourse is that «wine is embedded in land; land is embedded in what is regarded as regional culture; the latter is embedded in national history» (Inglis 2015; see also Inglis and Almila 2020). The rhetoric of the «return to terroir», however, is suspicious and inadequate at the same time. On the one hand, since reclaiming a passionate attachment to soil and tradition beyond market interest, while colluding with the global market of authenticity, tradition and heritage tourism (e.g. Inglis 2015). On the other hand, since relying on an «unreflexive localism» (DuPuis and Goodman 2005) which is at best unable to address the political, economic and aesthetic challenges posed by the current predicaments and, at worst, complicit with ever-rising reactionary rhetorics of identity, nationalism and colonialism (e.g. Handel *et al.* 2015). Moreover, the narrative has been complemented by the reclaiming of the role of winemakers and their artistry in shaping the style of the wine (Demossier 2011, 693) – further cementing the understanding of winemaking as a matter of anthropocentric mastery. While this socio-cultural sensibility promised a finer attention to the relational production of terroir, its eminently anthropocentric construction makes sure that the nonhuman components and de facto *producers* of terroir are duly silenced (Arceño 2021). «It is after all about place-making in an interconnected world where globalization remains translated and interpreted in local terms», writes Marion Demossier (2011, 695). Translated, interpreted, and left unchallenged, notwithstanding the anti-industrial and anti-profit rhetorics – rhetorics that normally remain abstract enough to be easily disattended in practice (e.g. Overton 2010; Inglis 2015; Howland and Dutton 2020), while other important

political, ecological and economic question are quietly concealed beneath the fetish of place.

The democratic critique

The contemporary *dispositif* through which terroir is framed – notwithstanding the significant differences articulating the concept, especially between New and Old World (e.g. Paxson 2010; Fourcade 2012) – rests on a tripartite reductionism that is perfectly in tune with the hegemonic imaginary feeding the global agro-industrial system. Terroir is reduced to: soil *qua* disposable matter; land *qua* legal space of exception; and place *qua* socio-cultural fetish.

The limits of the traditional understanding of terroir have been already exposed in the last century, from the 19th Mosel Valley controversy Kevin Goldberg insightfully recounted (2011) to the 1980s development of wine's New World, notably after the fateful 1976 Paris blind tasting competition that saw a shocking triumph of Californian wines over Bordeaux ones. In particular, the contemporary critique of terroir has been unfolding within the context of a typically American aversion for traditional hierarchies, a libertarian appeal to individual freedom to taste, unremitting faith in science and technology, reliance on marketing promotion and trust in the regulating power of market price. Accordingly, I propose to frame what Marion Fourcade (2012), following a sentence by the mythical wine critic Robert Parker, defined as «democratic critique», as a threefold attack to the traditional notion of terroir: a political critique against the entrenched hierarchies of power reflected and reproduced by the Old World's terroir discourse (e.g. Moran 1993); an epistemological critique demystifying the notion of terroir by claiming its scientific untenability (e.g. Clancy 2013); a cultural critique proposing to reorient the *sense* of wine, from an expression of terroir to a reflection of (consumer's) taste (e.g. Howland 2011). The «democratic critique» has sparked a liberalisation in the practices of production and consumption. On the one hand, it has fuelled an approach to winemaking based on the use of scientific advances in chemistry and microbiology to systematically *outflank* terroir (Murdoch *et al.* 2000; Matthews 2016) in order to meet consumer demand. On the other, the wider availability of simpler and clearer information – wine varietal, tasting notes, food matching, wine reviews, simplified rating system – has allowed the consumer to navigate through different options orienting her towards the right choice (Howland 2013).

As I have argued elsewhere (Pavoni 2020), the contemporary *dispositif* of terroir and the tripartite democratic critique levelled against it ultimately rest on the same ontological foundations. In both cases – whether through the rigid codification of appellation systems or the ostensibly liberating logic of market preferences – winemaking is reduced to a consequentialist logic: a practice ori-

ented toward the efficient production of predetermined outcomes. Within this framework, the act of making (and tasting) wine is consistently framed as an exercise of mastery. Accordingly, an expert subject – be it the winemaker, the oenologist, or the sommelier – imposes their will upon an ostensibly passive object (the soil, the vineyard, the cellar, or the wine itself), with the ultimate goal of forcing wine to «comply with human temporalities and designs» (Mariani 2023, 71). The underlying aim is the extraction of value through the containment and control – indeed, the domestication – of wine’s inherently unruly, excessive and wild vitality. It is precisely here that NW marks a radical departure.

Natural wine

Situated within broader decades-long shifts in food politics, where ethical, aesthetic and ecological concerns have been mobilised against the social and environmental violence of agro-industrial neoliberalism, NW refers to an approach to winemaking defined by minimal intervention, which challenges the norms, practices and values of conventional – particularly industrialised – wine production, on the account of their effects on the global commodification of wine, the standardisation of taste and environmental degradation (see Feiring 2011; Pineau 2019; Legeron 2014; Viecelli 2021a). NW is composed by a transnational, heterogeneous and loose community connecting rural producers and urban consumers through associations, distributors, venues and festivals. Positions and attitudes within this «community» may vary. While many natural winemakers express unease with the rigid standards of PDO systems, for instance, not all reject them outright. Similarly, some operate without official certifications, relying instead on shared protocols within NW associations, while others push for institutional recognition. This heterogeneity convinced Pablo Alonso González and Eva Parga-Dans (2023) to frame it as a *counter-cultural phenomenon* – once niche, now a global trend. This definition is helpful to situate NW within the role played by specialty food and drinks in the ongoing «rediscovery» and re-signification of traditional craft into neo-craft imaginaries, aesthetics and subjectivities (Smith Maguire 2020; see also Ocejó 2017; Gandini and Gerosa 2023). The risk of framing it as «just» a phenomenon, however, is that of partially downplaying its deeper ethical, ontological and political underpinnings. This is why, elsewhere, I’ve suggested understanding it as a movement (Pavoni 2020; 2025). I am aware, however, that this requires a fair amount of stretching the sociological definition of «movement». Jonathan Nossiter (2019, 52) – also director of the *Mondovino* documentary – argues that NW is «*more* a phenomenon than a movement because, like Occupy Wall Street, it has a natural disdain for imposed rules». The claim is curious, given the long-standing political tradition of anarchism which, while being undoubt-

edly characterised by such a natural disdain, has informed social movements for almost two centuries. One could argue, in fact, that the «normative design» that characterises NW – particularly its reliance on internal «rules» governing each association and often participatory certification protocols – is a key reason for highlighting its «movement-like» quality (Pavoni 2025). A loose movement, to be sure, since the tense debate within NW on whether or not providing it with an official certification offers a clear indication of its heterogeneity.

As Corrado Dottori (2016), winemaker at *La Distesa*, asserts, NW is not merely a «*type*» of wine, a production «*method*», or a marketable «*brand*». Rather, it constitutes a «*counter-cultural* movement» rooted in a distinct aesthetic and ethical stance – one that embodies what he calls a «*critical* view [...] on the ongoing economic-ecological catastrophe». While this definition may reflect Dottori’s aspirational vision for NW more than its current reality, I draw on his formulation to argue that NW is indeed animated by a strong, movement-like impulse. This impulse, I contend, forms its ethico-onto-epistemic core – a set of principles that, while not universally representative of all natural wines, nonetheless distinguishes NW from the hegemonic, conventional winemaking paradigms. In the rest of this text, I focus specifically on how this «*difference*» reconfigures the concept of terroir. By examining NW’s political, epistemological and cultural reworking of *soil*, *land* and *place* – what I term NW’s «*anarchic critique*» of terroir – I aim to uncover an alternative viticultural ontology, one that challenges the extractive logics of conventional wine production, distribution and consumption.

One final note. The ideas that follow are informed by nearly two decades of immersion in the world of natural wine – through visits to wineries, tastings and events across Europe, and through conversations with countless winegrowers, distributors, bar owners, sommeliers and enthusiasts and critics alike. Over time, these exchanges evolved into formal academic inquiry (Pavoni 2018; 2020; 2025). Here, I do not ground the analysis in empirical material or in the manifestos and debates that animate the field. Instead, I pursue a different trajectory, namely, a speculative and theoretical intervention seeking to disinter the concept *terroir* that the field of NW cultivates.

The anarchic critique

In the preface to *Fundamentals of Soil Ecology*, the authors write: «When we view the soil system as an environment for organisms, we must remember that the biota have been involved in its creation, as well as adapting to life within it». «Soil is alive», they insist, «and is composed of living and nonliving components» (Coleman *et al.* 2004, xvi). Recent research and activism on soil ecology foregrounded an understanding of soil as a lively, more-than-human entanglement,

«unsettling long-established boundaries between life and non-life, agents and subjects, above and belowground» (Granjou and Philips 2023, 411; see also Puig de la Bellacasa 2015). Novel «scientific practices and narratives», argues Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2019, 392), have «contribute[d] to the formation of new ecological cultures of care for the non-human world», challenging what Heather Paxson once described as the modernist «neglect of the microbe»⁷.

These «scientific, practitioner and cultural imaginaries of soil aliveness» (Puig de la Bellacasa 2019, 392) are perfectly consistent with NW's theoretical-practical engagement with the multispecies entanglements composing the vineyard and cellar (Arceño 2021). Referring to NW's putative father, Paul Cohen noted that: «The “nature” with which [Jules] Chauvet imagined and sought to anchor his research and his wines is, first and foremost, a microscopic one, imagined as the populations of microorganisms resident on grape skins» (Cohen 2013, 277). Chauvet saw the terroir as alive, teeming with yeasts and bacteria that were endangered by the intensive practices of the agro-industrial model embraced by France after the Second World War. Likewise, he saw the vast recourse to sulphur dioxide as a poison for the whole microbial culture of the terroir, especially when it came to the indigenous yeasts, that he defended «as the sole legitimate actors in fermentation» (Cohen 2013, 274; see also Chauvet 1998, 73)⁸. Chauvet's impulse has fed a vision of terroir as not a passive matter to be acted upon by either technoscientific manipulation or individual artistry, but a «shared aliveness» (Puig de la Bellacasa 2019, 391) to be preserved, fostered and let unfold. Hence, for instance, the insistence on promoting the self-sufficiency and «natural resistance» of the vineyard (Chauvet 1998, 72; Pineau 2019, 14, 101) by fostering multispecies collaborations while avoiding the resort to invasive chemicals.

As I have argued in previous work, the ontology underlying this vision aligns with a speculative conception of terroir as *agencement* – understood as the dynamic «holding together» of heterogeneous elements (bodies, values, materialities, discourses and practices). The *agencement* exhibits two fundamental characteristics: *emergence*, since its expressive qualities cannot be reduced to the sum of its constituent parts, generating instead novel configurations of meaning and affect; and *exteriority*, since it sustains an irreducible vital excess – a generative surplus that perpetually escapes codification within established regimes of perception, measurement and control (Deleuze and Guattari [1980] 2004, 323; Pavoni 2020; see also Viecegli 2021a, 185).

A «relation is always more lively than its systematic registering», reminds Brian Massumi. «There is an excess of liveliness over any indexing of it» (2018, 45). This

⁷ «Neglect of the microbe (any organism, in the singular, invisible to the naked human eye)», writes Heather Paxson, «continues to distort our anthropological view of the social world» (2008, 18-19).

⁸ «The imperative to rely on ambient yeasts for fermentation», writes Cohen, «offered the conceptual basis upon which Chauvet ultimately grounded his definition of natural wine» (2013, 274).

excess he terms «surplus-value of life», a qualitative, contingent, incommensurable effect whose intensity does not depend on the quantity of its contributory elements but on «their *manner* of coming integrally together» (ivi, 40). Erin Manning (2016, 64), Massumi's colleague at Montreal's SenseLab, introduces the notion of «anarchic share» to address this collective excess by posing the «question of how value emerges from what is not quite registered». Christoph Brunner (2016, 65) reformulates this as the problem of «how to enter into sharing, how to dive through the anarchic power of the share, and how to resurface while keeping the ultrathin layer of the shared with us». «To activate the anarchic share is a paradox», Manning adds: «to bring the anarchic share into the register of conscious actualization is to turn it into an archive. Techniques are needed to attune experience to its more-than. These techniques must be able to do the work of registering intensity without capturing it entirely» (2016, 64).

The central problematic that NW engages with can be framed through this fundamental question: how might we reconfigure the relation between technique and experience to better register, conserve and leverage the anarchic excess that emerges contingently through collective practice? NW's ethos thus becomes one of *custodianship* – a commitment to protecting and nurturing the emergent, more-than-human ecology that constitutes terroir (Pineau 2019). This manifests, on the one hand, through the systematic rejection of interventions that are deemed destructive to vineyard ecologies such as invasive chemical treatments, or stifling to wine's vital expressivity in the cellar, from excessive filtration to technological overdetermination⁹. And, on the other, through the active cultivation of terroir's generative excess – from honouring spontaneous fermentations (Furness 2022) to embracing the vibrant instability that animates the bottled wine (Pineau and Foyer 2024).

Wine discourse often frames terroir as an ineffable quality – a *je ne sais quoi* or *genius loci* – that transcends measurable factors (soil, climate, topography), a «more» that «can be presented, but it cannot be proven» (Kramer 2008, 228; see also Wilson 1998, 55; Unwin 2012). Critics (e.g. Whalen 2010; Nowak 2012; Clancy 2013) dismiss this as a socio-cultural construct or marketing myth, arguing that it lacks scientific grounding. The debate often falls into a binary: either terroir is a measurable, scientific reality, or it is mere romanticised rhetoric. Instead of rejecting the «more» of terroir as unscientific, NW performs an epistemological shift (e.g. Teil 2012), treating it as materially real – an *excess* that exists beyond conventional

⁹ For instance, no use of insecticides, herbicides, artificial fertilizers, or other added chemicals (e.g. artificial products modifying colour, flavour and texture of the wine) is allowed. Likewise, the codes of conduct of the various NW associations converge in permitting no addition of sugar (*chaptalisation*), little or no addition of sulphur dioxide, no filtration, clarification, micro-oxygenation, reverse osmosis, no use of standardised industrial yeast and so on. Obviously, this is not the place to discuss technical details, which are also dependent on the specific typology of wine (e.g. sweet, sparkling, etc.). For an overview, see Legeron (2014).

metrics. The «more» of NW's terroir is not mystical, but *materially relational*. It arises from the interactions between soil, microbes, climate and human practices. This aligns with biologist Jean-Jacques Kupiec's (2019) «anarchic theory of the living», which emphasises *relational, aleatory variation* (randomness, unpredictability) as fundamental to life. In this view, the variability and instability of living systems (soil, vines, microbial life) are not problems to be controlled but intrinsic sources of an expanded notion of value. Where conventional winemaking treats this variability as a problem to be solved (extracting value through stability, reliability and consistency via science, technology and institutional protocols), NW embraces variability as *the source of value itself* – an expression of the «shared aliveness» of the ecosystem, as an «intrinsic value [...] beyond human use»¹⁰.

This sort of «trans-species encounter value» (Haraway 2008, 46; Barua 2016) tends to be nullified when converted into quantitative commensuration – think of the strict legal definition and evaluation mechanisms of the PDO system, the quantitative reductionism of wine ratings, or the fetishisation of terroir into a purely socio-cultural construct to be valued in relation to human subjective investments. Instead, NW making seeks to protect, store and leverage this intensity, through caring practices in the vineyard and «controlled decontrolling» in the cellar (cf. Lorimer 2020). If natural wines are, as a consequence, less reliable and more unpredictable, this stems first and foremost from their deliberate exposure to this collective, spontaneous, exuberant vitality. This is also testified by the experience of tasting NW, countless times referred to, by producers, distributors and consumers alike, as conveying some sort of energy, vibration, uncertainty and aliveness (Krzywoszynska 2015; Sangiorgi and Rigaux 2017; Pineau and Foyer 2024).

The radical reconfiguration of the century-old dogma of wine tasting that NW ushers in testifies for this attention. Natural wines have characteristics that would normally be dismissed as «faults» by official wine manuals, experts and consumers in terms of smell, colour, taste, consistency and so on. Rather than assuming them to be errors, however, within the world of NW they are embraced as the expression of the agentic vitality of terroir. NW still has to taste «good», to be sure. Yet, the point is the very notion of «good» is released from dogmatic normative assumptions and from terroir-wine correspondences hitherto assumed as culturally and legally immutable (see Pavoni 2020). The value of a wine's taste,

¹⁰ In her reflection on the contemporary political ecology of soil, Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2019, 391, 393) argues that «altering the imaginaries of soils as inert matter subjected to human use and re-animating the life within them is transforming contemporary human–soil affections by developing a sense of shared aliveness», which means attending to soil as «living worlds with an intrinsic value *for themselves* beyond the human use». This intrinsic value is systematically silenced within the contemporary *dispositif* of terroir.

in this context, therefore lies not so much in its reproducibility as in its capacity to be a unique, contingent expression of a living entanglement¹¹.

This anarchic potential of NW terroir sits uneasily with the rigid codification imposed by PDO regulations, which effectively *archive* terroir by privileging characteristics that align with a fixed normative framework (Broadway 2023), while disregarding those deemed too unstable, unreliable, or unverifiable. As Caterina Nirta (2025, 6) reminds us, «Once the document is archived, it belongs to the archive, which then determines which aspects are deemed relevant – worthy of care – and which are obscured» As an «origin», a «principle» and a «command» (the different meanings of *arkhe*), the PDO *qua* archive violently freezes terroir into a «privileged topology [... a] place of election where law and singularity intersect in *privilege*» (Derrida [1995] 1996, 3). Besides naturalising terroir by erasing the political conditions of its constitution and the more than human relations that produce it, PDO regulations also reduce taste to a revelatory activity performed by an (expert) subject onto an (inert) object. The tasting commissions, argues Nicolas Joly from *Coulée of Serrant*, «don't say that your wine is not good, but that it is too different from the AC's "defined taste" for you to be included» (in Legeron 2013).

The anarchic critique advanced by NW, however, does not simply give way to the unrestrained «creativity» championed by industrial winemaking, with its reliance on microbiological and chemical interventions. Instead, NW operates through a complex normative system, articulated via various protocols, regulations and manifestos that form the infrastructure of its associations.

It is particularly in this regard that the critique of NW should be conceptualised as «anarchic» rather than «democratic» – understanding the latter concept particularly in the context of its more recent, (neo)liberal breeding ground. First, the anarchic approach seeks to align winemaking with the unruly vitality of terroir itself, rather than grounding it in the neoliberal notion of individual freedom – i.e. the idea that one should be able to make wine however one pleases. Second, it aims to free winemaking from the institutional grip of state-enforced PDO regulations, which codify terroir into a rigid, archival logic. In doing so, NW's normative frameworks harness the surplus-value of life – attuning production to the differential, ever-shifting vitality of the land – while resisting its reduction into a fixed terroir *dispositif*. Let us unpack this further.

NW protocols go beyond the «merely» oenological, including matters of transparency, price, distribution chain, size, labour and so on¹². They transcend technical guidelines, embodying a broader ethical and ontological vision of

¹¹ Likewise, we may argue that, while Slow Food seeks an important reevaluation of the notion of «pleasure» against the asceticism of much of contemporary food ethics, it ultimately fails to «discomfort» it, that is, to challenge what *pleasure* is in the first place (see Hayes-Conroy and Martin 2010).

¹² See for instance, in the Italian context, the protocols of VAN (Vignaioli Artigiani Naturali), La Terra Trema, or Slow Wine.

winemaking – one rooted in ecological awareness, responsible engagement and a commitment to sincerity (Raffray 2024). Unlike PDO frameworks, which prescribe rigid standards, NW systems typically operate through negative rules – prohibiting certain interventions rather than dictating methods. This creates a radically different regulatory logic: one that is simultaneously too broad and too restrictive to fit neatly within conventional appellation systems. These rules pose very stringent constraints on practices in the vineyard and in the cellar, but are irrespective of grape variety or geographical origin. The result is paradoxical. Terroir is decoupled from fixed geography and grounded instead in the expressive potential of a «whatever locality», while shaped by strict, non-negotiable constraints on viticulture and winemaking. Neither overcome by unbridled de-terroir-isation nor fossilised into a (re)iterated origin, terroir thus becomes incompatible with the demands of scalability and standardisation of industrial winemaking but also with PDO's demand for consistency and reliability¹³.

Challenging the PDO *qua* archive, NW protocols therefore manage to simultaneously resist both agro-industrial de-terroir-isation and the metaphysical promise of a «return to the terroir» *qua* origin. Instead, they embrace terroir as an emergent, multispecies collaboration, not an «a priori natural condition» or socio-cultural construct, but the «a posteriori, creative production» of a multispecies collective (Viecelli 2021b, 591; Arceño 2021). This also sets NW making apart from the rhetoric of individual artistry that has crept into contemporary *terroirist* narratives (see, e.g., Demossier 2011; Alonso González and Parga-Dans 2018). NW, in fact, appears to assume wine as not so much the product of human mastery over nature, as the result of a more-than-human creativity¹⁴. NW protocols could be said to neutralise the regulatory mechanisms of PDO regulations without succumbing to *laissez-faire* logic of industrial winemaking and rather opening a space of non-law within law: a *space of excess*, rather than exception, that allows for the surplus value of life of terroir to be expressed within the non-scalable obligations of its relational materiality (cf. Tsing 2012; Pavoni 2018).

A key novelty of NW, in this sense, is the convergence between the care for the soil that feeds the process of winemaking *and* the collective, surplus effect that is thus generated. Neither artists mastering the art of winemaking nor diletantes unable to make decent wine – as they are at times denigrated – natural winemakers become custodians, caretakers (Pineau 2019; Perullo 2021) who

¹³ For a different argument, similarly exploring this peculiar configuration of generality and particularity, see Jennifer Maguire Smith's (2020) suggestion to use the notion of «provenance» as an articulation of product, producer and context of production. The notion of terroir I am developing here partially resonates with hers but pushes it beyond by seeking to think speculatively and strategically NW vis-à-vis terroir's anarchic excess of liveliness.

¹⁴ Thinking this relation beyond nature and culture allows to explain the apparent rhetorical «ambivalence» (Viecelli 2021a, 122) or «awkward verbal balancing» (Inglis 2015) between the presentation of wines as «nature in the glass» and the emphasis on the craft of the winemaker.

are committed to the «ethical obligations» of terroir. It is important to underline the implicit, ontological shift this understanding subtends, signalling a move «from ethical commitments arising out of moral principles – such as contracts or promises – to be embedded in vital material forces involved in the constraints of everyday continuation and maintenance of life» (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 22). This understanding resonates with the indigenous vision of «land *as system of reciprocal relations and obligations*» explored by Dene thinker Glen Coulthard (2014, 13) through the notion of «grounded normativity». As Andrea Mubi Brighenti and Matthias Kärrholm remind, following the lesson of Georges Canguilhem, «Living things do not simply conform to external norms but secrete their own intrinsic normative stance» (2020, 34). This is what orients indigenous thinking and struggle, the grounded normativity of land as a «system of reciprocal relations and obligations», rather than its projection as mere resource. In this context, then, problems potentially emerge, for example, when, having to negotiate land claims, First Nation people are forced to translate such a grounded normativity into the language of property and contract, turning land into object, that is, turning a struggle «*informed* by the land» into one «*for* land, understood now as material resource to be exploited» (Coulthard 2014, 78). The liberal grammar of right, as Elizabeth Povinelli suggests, eventually «creates the discursive situation in which parties can feel and act as if they were separate things» (in Lucchetti and Wielander 2018, 156-157): it fragments a collective entanglement into a set of objects, subjects and the relative property claims.

PDO regulations, likewise, tend to fragment immanent responsibilities, replacing care for the land with compliance to the law. All that counts, eventually, is whether the wine matches the appellation. The current debate over NW certification is therefore pivotal¹⁵. To date, NW protocols have largely been upheld through informal but rigorous systems of participatory certification, where trust, mutual accountability and community oversight take precedence over bureaucratic validation. Yet, as mentioned above, opinions within the movement remain deeply divided. Winemakers like Angelino Maule of *La Bianca*, founder of the influential *VinNatur* association, argue that without state-backed certification, NW lacks formal legitimacy (Casiello 2021). Others, instead, view such institutional recognition as fundamentally incompatible with NW's ethos – a Trojan horse that would reduce it to just another winemaking technique, stripping away its political and ecological substance (Dottori 2025). For these producers, official certifications risk not only the dilution but the outright co-optation of NW, risking to sever the web of mutual trust on which the NW «community» rests, as

¹⁵ See Alonso Gonzalez and Parga-Dans 2023; 2025; Alonso Gonzalez *et al.* 2022 for a recap on the emerging models of certification (e.g., in France and Hungary), the current positions and the main arguments in favour and against.

insightfully expressed by Barbara Pulliero and Paolo Rusconi (2013, my translation), winemakers at *Filarole*:

Between natural wine producers and many of those who drink their wine there emerged a relationship of trust and direct knowledge which is far more important and valuable than any regulations or certifications. A sort of certification that is participated by a community of people not only sharing common tastes but also values and ideas, is a certification that no «industrial» company, no matter how much money it spends on marketing operations, will ever be able to buy or emulate.

Besides the epistemological critique of soil and the political critique of PDO regulations, we see here the lineament of a *cultural* critique. Natural winemakers – at least a significant part of them – do assert a culture of production and consumption that neither delegates all responsibility to an institutional third party nor to the invisible tongue of the market but rather insists on an «emergent relationship» between consumers, producers and other practitioners in the field.

From the fetishised idea of terroir *qua* static place, we find in NW a dynamic rearticulation of the relation between wine, people and place, one that is transversal to the tired local/global dichotomy (cf. West 2022), and that indicates promising ways to navigate the tensions between different value regimes without resorting to the standardising logic of conventional appellations and certifications (cf. Centemeri 2018). This not simply a matter of projecting socio-cultural values onto a vineyard, a cellar, a bottle, or even an expanded notion of «provenance» (cf. Smith Maguire 2020). «Value», writes Heather Paxson (2010, 453), «is not just materially extracted from or discursively inscribed on place» – it also emerges through trans-local circuits of desires, trust and concerns. The NW ecosystem exemplifies this perfectly, its participatory verification models distributing the work of value creation across sprawling networks connecting rural vigneron with urban drinkers through vibrant communities of intermediaries such as distributors, retailers, sommelier, writers and so on (Smith Maguire 2020; Alonso González and Parga-Dans 2023, 45). What emerges is neither traditionally local nor abstractly global, but a genuinely trans-local space that avoids both the parochialism of terroir fundamentalism and the rootlessness of industrial production, offering a compelling alternative to the spatial imaginaries of conventional viticulture.

Conclusion

NW advances an anarchic critique of conventional terroir through three fundamental operations: *reanimating* its soils, *unarchiving* its land and *trans-localising* its place. This stands in stark contrast to Anthropocenic visions of soil as yet another exhausted resource in humanity's destructive productionist paradigm. Paraphras-

ing Puig de la Bellacasa (2019, 391), with NW practices «soils are re-animated and enlivened, a sense of human-soil entangled and intimate interdependency is intensified». Here, terroir transcends its traditional conceptualisations – whether as geographic site, cultural construct, or natural given. Instead, it emerges as the dynamic co-production of a multispecies collective, whose anarchic potential is safeguarded and mobilised through alternative imaginaries, normative frameworks and participatory systems of trust. In conclusion, a few qualifications.

First, characterising NW as possessing anarchic tendencies should not be mistaken for claiming all natural winemakers consciously espouse anarchist politics. While some undoubtedly do, my argument concerns, more profoundly, the movement's ontological and epistemological presuppositions. Contending that there is an anarchic *tendency* within the NW field does not mean pretending it is all-encompassing either. Rather, I would stress that it is what makes NW, potentially, a counter-cultural movement (Dottori 2016), without anarchism necessarily being a consciously *political* stance.

Second, «anarchic» here does not only refer to the political gesture of refusing to be governed and defined by a centralised institution. It does also refer to the ontological presupposition of variation, rather than origin [*archè*], as the groundless foundation of the winemaking process (cf. Kupiec 2019; Malabou 2022).

Third, that NW remains a commercial enterprise does not invalidate this reading. Not only because anarchy and the market are not incompatible. But also because, with Massumi: «Complicity is an ontological condition under neoliberalism. It cannot be avoided, but it is not all-defining. It should not just be critiqued. It should be *practiced* strategically, in ways aimed at always upping the ratio of escape over capture» (2018, 68).

Finally, to those who might dismiss this theoretical framing as irrelevant to practitioners focused simply on making good wine, we must challenge the false theory/practice dichotomy¹⁶. All practice is theoretical – a point starkly illustrated by establishment figures like Riccardo Cotarella (president of Assoenologi) whose dismissal of NW as «nonexistent» itself constitutes a particular philosophical position, however unexamined. Let us read his words:

how many times do we hear that grapes grow by themselves, wine makes itself, nature takes care of it? It's up to man to take care of it [...] Natural wine doesn't exist, it simply doesn't. Nature gave us grapes for two purposes: either to eat them or to make vinegar. It created grapes for this reason alone. If we want to make wine, we must deviate from the natural path, using science, experience, and learning from mistakes that should not be

¹⁶ Kupiec puts it very effectively when, at the end of his anarchic theory of the living he notes that, for many scientists, deeming a position as «philosophy» is used as a pejorative rhetorical move, as if to say: this is useless chatter, let's talk about science instead. However, Kupiec explains, «these scientists are not aware they are practicing philosophy constantly, they cannot escape from philosophy, because there is always an ontology within their theory, even when they are not aware of it» ([2019] 2021, 249, my translation).

repeated [... we need to] distinguish what is poetry and philosophy from what is reality¹⁷.

Cotarella's position inadvertently reveals the unacknowledged philosophical foundations underpinning his ostensibly scientific approach. His assertion rests on a tacitly hylomorphic worldview with almost biblical overtones: nature provides grapes merely for sustenance or accidental fermentation, while science alone enables the transcendence of these natural limits to produce «proper» wine. This implicit metaphysics of mastery – positioning human knowledge as overcoming nature's deficiencies – exemplifies precisely the arrogant privileging of instrumental rationality over other ways of knowing such as the ones NW gestures towards. NW's reimagining of terroir demonstrates how philosophical reconceptualisation and practical transformation are inextricably linked. Natural winemakers do not simply propose alternative winemaking techniques, but challenge the very epistemological hierarchy that would dismiss its approach as mere «poetry» in contrast to putatively objective oenological science. The reconfiguration of terroir NW envisages, *pace* Cotarella, is philosophical *and* practical at the same time.

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¹⁷ See Benocci, L. (2024) *Il vino naturale non esiste. Riccardo Cotarella: Servono scienza ed esperienza, altrimenti facciamo disastri*, on the website «Agricoltura.it – Il giornale dell'agricoltura italiana», 18 February, my translation.

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