The City Devouring Itself
Urbanibalism in Times of World Wars, Insurgent Communes and Biopolitical Sieges

Wietske Maas, Matteo Pasquinelli

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In times of war, the accepted food chain is broken and the city becomes 'edible'. It starts to cannibalize itself, according to Wietske Maas and Matteo Pasquinelli, who use various historical examples to prove their point. With this 'urbanibalisme', as they call it, as their motive, they've developed a recipe for a therapeutic beverage, *Ferment Brussels*, to bring a toast to a communal lifestyle as the antidote to rising forms of nationalism.

'No work, no spuds. No work, no turnips, no tanks, no flying fortress. No victory.' (Propaganda film *Victory Garden* issued by the US Department of Agriculture, 1943)

'Un espace de vie privé de Tiers paysage serait comme un esprit privé de l'inconscient. Cette situation parfaite, sans démon, n'existe dans aucune culture connue.' (Gilles Clément, *Manifeste du Tiers Paysage*, 2004)

Dig for Victory! England at War and Spade, 1941-1945

Urban farming was a serious undertaking long before today's food crisis and the upsurge of sustainability jargon and art avant-*gardens*. City acreages have historically been cultivated in preparation for and in times of war. In the early Middle Ages, many towns were designed with plots inside the defence walls in order to grow a self-sufficient source of vegetables during recurrent sieges. Also the *hortus conclusus,* the cloister of the abbey, was an 'enclosure' of the countryside to be cultivated and protected from attacks by barbarians. [1] Today, in a Cuba still under US embargo, roof-tops, public squares and collapsed buildings are inventively turned into sites for growing everyday food.

During the Second World War, as the Germans sank many of the vessels bringing food to Britain, the campaign *Dig for Victory!* surged to a national imperative. High-yield war gardens helped Brits save fuel and allocate more domestic money for the troops and military arms. US propaganda already stated clearly: 'A victory garden is like a share in an airplane factory. It helps win the war and pays dividends too.' [2] As Carloyn Steel points out: 'By the end of the war, an estimated 1.5 million allotments in Britain were providing a tenth of the nation's food, and one half of all its fruits and vegetables . . . It often takes the disruption of normal food supplies to reveal a city's productive potential.' [3]

The scenario of war, more than a well-regulated city ecology, forces a recognition of the overlooked nature across the urban landscape. This space is what the gardener Gilles Clément refers to as the *third landscape*, a 'residue' full of biological potential that grows between the first landscape of nature and the second landscape of man. [4] Clement never uses the term 'ecology' as he prefers to stress the autonomous power of the neglected and uncultivated spaces of the environment. Yet not even in a global megalopolis is the

dominion of concrete absolute. A recent example of metropolitan resistance – guerrilla gardening and seed bombing – shows how cities are not a separate ecosystem but a terrain still permeable to 'involuntary' vegetation.

From ancient barbarians to modern biopolitics, war has changed (its) nature. The pacified and all-reconciling political horizon of *sustainability* brings to mind a war time without war, the siege of a silent Ghost Army. [5] Indeed it is more realistic to suppose, along the lines of contemporary political thought, that there is no longer an outside enemy. Within the field of *sustainable development* we have established the borders of our own siege. [6] Today's sustainability and 'consume less' imperatives are in fact shared by a broad spectrum of abiders from anarchist squatters to Prince Charles of Wales. [7] What were once collective coordinates of conflict are now individually introjected and de-politicized. The patriotic war *for* surplus has moved from the *home front* to the *inner front* to become a war *on* surplus, through a highly individualized calculation of energy consumption, carbon footprint, CO_2 emissions, intake of animal proteins, and so forth. The mantra 'consume less' echoes something of a born again Protestant ethics: 'Desire less.' A biopolitical governance has exerted its control once again from the midst of a so-called radical agenda. [8] In an unconscious way, urban farming and sustainable development resurrect the spectres of war and siege.

Hunting Swans and Stewing Tulips: The Netherlands under Occupation, 1943-1944

During the Second World War, another pamphlet that was widely distributed in the UK instructed civilians how to 'Eat for Victory'. [9] But this *homeland security* cuisine was simply addressing a more Spartan domestic economy and neglected the untapped surplus of edibles in the city, which other parts of Europe more devastated by war, such as the Netherlands, were forced to recognize. In non-war periods, edibles from the residual and unclean spaces of the city are considered indecent. Many schools of ecology, in particular, maintain a reverence for a 'wild' environment untouched by humans outside the urban border. On the contrary, there is always a spontaneous surplus of edibles in the city exceeding civic ecology, food distribution channels and activist urban farming. In violating the usual food chain, war uncovers the city as an organism in itself: the city 'becomes edible' but, moreover, starts to cannibalize itself: *urbanibalism*.

The Dutch famine of 1944-1945, the so-called 'hunger winter', was precipitated by a railway strike in September 1944. The Nazis retaliated by placing an embargo on all food transports to the Netherlands. The war of attrition affected the country's Western provinces, the Randstad, most severely. Thousands of inhabitants were forced to rummage for fuel and food. Kitchens became makeshift laboratories as women and men experimented in turning livestock feed into digestible pap and sugar beets into *slagcrème* and stew. [10]

Due to the suspension of the country's flower exports, the tulip industry in West Holland had accumulated mountains of bulbs in storage. When the medical authorities announced that the high starch content of the bulbs made them edible, farmers set about selling their stockpiles as food. The local *Commission Concerning Household Information and Family Management* released a handbill advising the ways to prepare tulip bulbs as a soup, mash or biscuits. Not only did the bulbs require less cooking and prove to be tastier than sugar beets, the tulip bulb itself became the symbol of the hunger winter, and, in a sense, a patriotic provender.

As the *hongerwinter* wore on, and the desperation rose, the Amsterdam populace became adept at hunting *urban game* – cats, dogs, horses, pigeons, even seagulls. As an eight-year-old, Frans Lavell recounts how a children's story of a medieval king feasting on swan prompted his grandfather to catch swan in Amsterdam's Zuiderzeepark. Lavell's tale narrates the duo's cumbersome attempt to kill a swan who defended itself and his

comrades even when headless: 'By golly, that beast was strong! Give me 30 of those swans and I'll drive all the Germans out of the Sarphatie street barracks!' [11] As with the tulip bulb – an emblem of Dutch capital – the hunted swan was a re-appropriation of a national symbol. Eating tulip or swan was not merely a matter of survival, but an act of insurgent culinary art.

In Amsterdam, as in many other parts of Europe, war had divulged an unknown potential, a hidden *third landscape of food,* to again borrow Clément's concept. [12] Instead of designing sustainable gardens, Clément practices a spontaneous relation with the living residues of nature around us. His maps highlight interstices, borders and parasitic surfaces of the cityscape. He is concerned about opening *biological doors* and *corridors* between these residues to make biodiversity circulate informally across the city. Yet, what Clément does not consider are the edibles, the spontaneous sources of food that grow autonomously from any planned agriculture (the second landscape). Correspondingly, we propose urbanibalism as the *third landscape of food*, a practice of opening up *culinary corridors* that traverse the different *Umwelts* of urban life.

Aside from warfare, it is water that has been the prime enemy of the Netherlands. The Dutch environment has been 'made' by winning land from the sea, and this degree of 'artificiality' could also be said to be true of its culinary tradition. Yet, the country's state-of-the-art engineering, its hydrological system of pumping water from the arable polders will not be sufficient against the rising sea level. If climate change predictions are correct, the Randstad soil will be increasingly infiltrated by water. In anticipation of this transition, the Rotterdam-based firm Van Bergen Kolpa architects has imagined an entire new food ecosystem and a new culinary view of the Netherlands. [13] Rather than 'defensive' interventions of a mechanized agriculture, Van Bergen Kolpa proposes small-scale dynamic farming for a landscape with more frequent exchanges of salt and sweet waters between sea, lagoons, dunes, creeks and polders. Its 2040 Flow Food menu shows the culinary potential of a wetter climate: a salad of barley with Dutch marsh herbs including watercress, wild chives, dandelion leaves, water mint; saddle of lamb with parsnip and sea lavender; oysters in an aspic of seawater and agar with *Salicornia* seagrass. The *third landscape of food* of the Netherlands will demand a new culinary art.

'And They Ate the Zoo.' Paris Commune under Siege, 1870-1871

Not all sieges are about starvation only. Some have also proven to be a creative, rebellious, joyful and decadent *expansion of the edible*, as was the case on the barricades of the Paris Commune fighting against the Prussians in 1870-1871. Parisians were gastronomically curious, 'involved in a process of discovery, and of creation', writes Rebecca Spang. [14] The forced *urbanibalism* of the siege was clearly enriched and reinvented by a sophisticated culinary tradition to 'spiritualize matter' and to transform the edible into, respectively, an aesthetic experience, a passionate topic of conversation and, not least, a political gesture. A cartoon of a Montmartre butcher's shop selling cat, rat and dog meat in Paris 1871 displays, however, a less noble phenomenon: 'It is estimated that during the siege over 5000 cats were slaughtered and eaten. A young cat, it was found; tasted like a squirrel but was tenderer and sweeter.' [15]

The most legendary, baroque and pantagruelian event was the sacrifice of the elephants Castor and Pollux of the zoo at the Jardin des Plantes. The dramatic end of the elephants was recorded in the last days of December 1870 in the *Gazette des Absents*, a twice-weekly periodical published during the siege and delivered by balloon to avoid the encircling Prussian forces. A restaurant menu from 25 December, the 99th day of the siege, offered *Consommé d'Eléphant* together with *Cuissot de Loup,sauce Chevreuil* (haunch of wolf with a deer sauce), *Terrine d'Antilope aux truffes* (terrine of antelope with truffles), *Civet de Kangourou* (kangaroo stew) and *Chameau rôti à l'anglaise* (roasted camel, English style). Of course, the poorest Parisians did not benefit from the decision to

'eat the zoo' and there was no real urgency to do so. In fact, some butchers started to speculate by selling horse meat as the exclusive elephant meat, thus only apparently replacing the more traditional *hippophagie*. [16]

The study of animals eaten in times of war deserves a new discipline, something between *polemozoology* and *polemogastronomy* (whereas the more 'conventional' *polemobotany* is devoted to research how flora is spread and affected by war). This discipline would have been crucial at the time of Paris siege. As Spang puts it: 'For fifty years before the siege, gastronomic guides (written to help the eater become "a clever tactician" prepared to do "combat" with the restaurateur) concentrated on the question of correctly identifying the component parts of a dish. The skilled eater, likened to Adam in the Garden of Eden, excelled in giving the one true name to a dish. The siege, then, demonstrated the eater's finest hour. In December of 1870, to name a dish correctly is also to call an animal by name. "Fantastical cookery" whether practiced, anticipated or discussed gave material substance both to meals and to conversations.'

The siege expanded the range of edible matter so much that it transmutated also those trades and commodities that usually dealt with the realm of *non-food.* [17] As trade outside the city becomes impossible, Paris merchants exchange functions among themselves; every shopkeeper becomes a grocer. Hairdressers and silversmiths sell poultry in 'a singular transmutation of commerce and a bizarre transfiguration of boutiques'. Yet nothing indicates that hunger might completely obliterate the specialization of stores and of goods. In these texts, the siege means not starvation but the expansion of the edible, the saleable and the noteworthy. A parfumeur's stock expands to include 'more or less de-perfumed oils' (butter substitutes) while it remains in the realm of the olfactory by offering herring and onions. [18]

This radical and inventive cuisine was also claimed by the workers' movement, which demanded not simply food to survive in time of war, but food for a modern revolution and the culinary pleasure as a constituent and materialistic right of the communards themselves. In his gastronomic novel *La vivandiera di Montélimar*, Gianni-Emilio Simonetti highlighted the emancipated role of the women of the Commune – proto-feminists fighting on the frontline of both the culinary and military barricades. [19] The siege of Paris also prompted the *légumiste* Élisée Reclus, a renowned geographer and anarchist advocating a meat-free diet as a form of rebellion and pioneer of the animal rights movement.

Which culinary movement is the urban landscape calling for? Contemporary aesthetics such as food design, molecular cuisine and bioart are only seemingly innovative and poor on the ecological ground since they mainly render food as an object of engineering or genetic code for programming. They only touch the surface of the edible and never its living matter (nothing is less spontaneous than bioart playing with DNA). In this sense, ancient recipes, the recent Slow Food presidia or *urbanibalism* in times of war may incarnate a more comprehensive 'scientific' knowledge than the techno-determinism of the latest biotech patent. Both techno-fetishist cuisine as well as eco-asceticism remove the *bios* as a living, flourishing and fermenting substance.

Opposite a pedestrian vitalism, the French philosopher Michel Serres reminds us of the dystopian dimension of nature in his book *The Parasite*. Nature is but a never-ending chain of parasites eating each other down to the invisible ones: 'The fruit spoils, the milk sours, the wine turns into vinegar, the vegetables rot, the stores of wheat are filled with rats and weevils. Everything ferments, everything rots. Everything changes.' [20] Microorganisms take our body back to nature after death: putrefaction is life, too. An unseen world of bacteria, fungi and yeasts is also part of our daily diet: they breath with us and eat with us (in our intestinal tract).

Beer and bread are different across Europe precisely because the microflora are different

everywhere and especially within the city. The know-how and the alliance with this microscopic and ever-proliferating world of parasites is what made humanity win the war against many viruses and noxious bacteria. Yeast was likely the divine agent [!] that made the miracle of turning the water into wine and gave us a new life, according to Serres: '[Ambrosia] is the brew that saved the human population of the Fertile Crescent, and from even further East of Eden, from certain infectious diseases found in the lakes and backwaters. Beer, wine, and bread, foods of fermentation, of bubbling, foods of decay, appeared as safeguards against death. These were our first great victories over parasites, our rivals . . . From the Olympians to the Last Supper, we have celebrated the victory to which we owe our life, the eternity of phylogenesis, and we celebrated it in its natural spot, the table.' [21]

Cities always ferment, nations too. Yet the cult of an ever-expanding *life* has also had its fair share of dangerous and identitarian interpretations which formed the basis of Nazi ideology. Hitler's notion of *Lebensraum* (literally 'living space') served as a major justification for Germany's aggression in East Europe to procure land and raw materials for a *Großdeutschland*. The urban population was to be exterminated by starvation, thus creating an agricultural surplus to feed Germany.

Ferment Brussels : A Toast to Communal Forms of Life, Brussels 2030

If a conclusion is to be drawn, it should be a recipe embracing the practices of *urbanibalism* as a valuable contravention to the upcoming forms of national conflict in Northwestern Europe. This recipe is located in Brussels, a fitting destination and nodal point of a journey between the Dutch *hongerwinter* and the siege of the Paris Commune, along the debated split between Wallonia and Flanders and alongside the gastronomic faultline between Mediterranean and Nordic cultures.

Ferment Brussels is an urban hydromiel, or *ambrosia* (the same mythological drink of Greek gods and first alcoholic beverage of early humankind): a therapeutic potion and a source of alcohol made from ingredients collected within the metropolitan landscape and from its invisible microflora. It is easily prepared by mixing one part of water with two parts of urban honey. [22] This concoction is then fermented with an infusion of plants: average city plant roots such as shepard's-purse, thistle or burdock can be used. All ingredients are then combined, heated and poured into a large glass vat with an airlock for four weeks. Fermentation should start within the first 24 hours, or can be precipitated by inoculating the wort with a few drops of local beer (Brussels has a particular type of beer, the Lambic, which fits this recipe, as it is spontaneously fermented by an indigenous urban yeast called *Brettanomyces bruxellensis*). [23] To get a fizzy and modern ambrosia, *Ferment Brussels* can be put into a resilient soda bottle for one week to turn fermentation into a very dense and delicate foam. Within the bottle, the invisible 'social ferment' of Brussels turns the urban honey into a convivial alcoholic beverage.

The Latin term for feast, *convivium,* literally means 'living together': eating together as communal life. *Convivium* can be more extensively understood as the 'commons of the living things' (as in *herbarium* or *bestiarium*). The dimension of the *convivium* should be more important than the restrained and individual production of any ecologically correct urban farming. What green capitalism will never be keen to share is the profit which will be accumulated on the new soils of sustainable agriculture and renewable energies. The first-ever alcoholic drink of humankind is offered here as a memento of the very remote past and very remote future, as a toast to insurgent and communal forms of life. This ambrosia is dedicated against the possible split of Belgium and to the impossible split of the ecosystem, to the invisible and flourishing world of creatures that are part of our daily food, wellbeing and inebriated states of mind, in particular, to all of us – invisible producers of surplus-value for the upcoming regime of green capitalism.

Wietske Maas lives in Amsterdam and works for the European Cultural Foundation. As an artist she is working (together with Matteo Pasquinelli) on the project *Urbanibalism*, which explores the gastronomic geography between the ecological fabrics of the city (www.urbanibalism.org).

Matteo Pasquinelli is a philosopher and Assistant Professor in Media Studies at Pratt Institute, New York. He wrote the book *Animal Spirits: A Bestiary of the Commons* (NAi,2008) and edited the anthology *Alleys of Your Mind: Augmented Intelligence and Its Traumas* (Meson, 2015) among others. With Wietske Maas he also wrote *The Manifesto of Urban Cannibalism* (2012). Website: www.matteopasquinelli.org

Footnotes

1. Rob Aben and Saskia de Wit, *The Enclosed Garden: History and Development of the Hortus Conclusus and Its Reintroduction into the Present-Day Urban Landscape* (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 1999).
2. Claude Wickard, Secretary of Agriculture, in *Victory Garden*, a film issued by the US Department of Agriculture, 1943 (www.archive.org).
3. Carolyn Steel, *Hungry City: How Food Shapes Our Lives* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2008), 316.
4. Gilles Clément, *Manifeste du Tiers Paysage* (Paris: Éditions Sujet/Objet, 2004).
5. The Ghost Army was a US Army tactical deception unit during the Second World War. It was given the unique mission to impersonate other army units in order to fool the enemy, using inflatable tanks and artillery, sound trucks, phoney radio transmissions and even playacting.
6. See: Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000). Negri has recently criticized in particular the forms of *soft activism* in the metropolis which believe to easily escape the 'biopolitical diagram' of capitalism: experiments of urban farming included. See: A. Negri, et al., 'Qu'est-ce qu'un événement ou un lieu biopolitique dans la métropole?', in: *Multitudes #38: Une micropolitique de la ville: l'agir urbain* (Paris: Editions Amsterdam, 2008).
7. See: Amir Djalali (with Piet Vollaard), 'The Complex History of Sustainability', in: *Volume #18: After Zero* (Amsterdam: Archis Publisher, 2008).
8. Critiques *à la* Žižek about an 'ecology without nature' do not suffice in providing an alternative account of the *bios* and dismiss the spontaneous life of the 'third landscape'. See: Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).
9. Jill Norman, *Eating For Victory: Healthy Home Front Cooking on War Rations* (London: Michael O'Mara, 2007).
10. Translaton of *whipped cream*, a culinary euphemism for a by-product of sugar beet. *Slagcrème* was popular as it looked delicious and suppressed hunger.
11. Frans Lavell, 'Kerstzwaan', self-published article, 2008.
12. In recent decades, the Netherlands have cultured an impressive lineage of publications covering different facets of urban ecosystems. See: Ton Denters, *Stadsplanten: veldgids voor de stad* ('s Graveland: Fontaine uitgevers, 2004); Johan van Zoest and Martin Melchers, *Leven in de stad: Betekenis en toepassing van natuur in de stedelijke omgeving* (Utrecht: Uitgeverij Knvv, 2006); Martin Melchers and Geert Timmermans, *Haring in het IJ: De verborgen dierenwereld van Amsterdam* (Amsterdam: Stadsuitgeverij, 1991); and Remco Daalder, *Stadse Beesten* (Amsterdam: Lubberhuizen, 2005).
13. Van Bergen Kolpa Architects, 'Food and the Randstad Metropolis', in: *Volume #18*, op. cit. (note 7).
14. Rebecca L. Spang, 'And They Ate the Zoo: Relating Gastronomic Exoticism in the Siege of Paris', *MLN*, no. 4, vol. 107 (September 1992) French Issue.
15. *Current Opinion #4* (New York: Current Literature Pub. Co, 1890), 379. For a diaristic account of horse, dog, cat and rat meat eaten during the siege, see: Nathan Sheppard, *Shut Up in Paris* (London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1871).
16. Spang, 'And They Ate the Zoo', op. cit. (note 14). *Hippophagie* is French for eating horse meat.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. See: Gianni-Emilio Simonetti, *La vivandiera di Montélimar: Il secolo delle rivolte logiche e la nascita della cucina moderna nelle memorie di una pétroleuse* (Rome: Derive Approdi, 2004).
20. Michel Serres, *Le Parasite* (Paris: Grasset, 1980); translation: *The Parasite* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 156-183.
21. Ibid.
22. Urban honey is surprisingly non-polluted: in processing nectar into

honey, bees eliminate any pollutants. Also, there are more bees in cities compared to the countryside, because of the herbicides used in agriculture. See the beekeeping project and purity analysis made by Marc Wollast at www.apisbruocsella.be.
23. We used a Lambic made at the Brasserie Cantillon (www.cantillon.be). For more details of this recipe see: www.urbanibalism.org.

Tags

Biopolitics, Urban Space

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