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Vina aperta and the quest for interconnectedness: Wine and an Eliasian sociology of food

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I have been researching wine over the past 15 years, interviewing wine producers and intermediaries who focus on wines that are small-scale, *terroir*-focused, and made following principles that support environmental sustainability, biodiversity, and meaningful work. On that basis, I feel confident saying: wine pairs exceptionally well with food, and it also pairs exceptionally well with the sociology of food, Eliasian or otherwise.

Apropos of this collection, I want to focus on what the work of Norbert Elias offers to a sociological examination of wine, and a sociology of food more widely. As one would expect of a cultural good with 8,000 years of human history, wine shows up in *The History of Manners*, in examples of national differences in codes of table behaviour, and what that might tell us about the materialisation and performance of the 'standard of relationships between people' (Elias 1978: 66). Thus, for example, we learn that it was still common for Germans in the early 18th century to share wine from the same glass, and that the French thought this a bit off (Elias 1978: 93). Yet, apart from such asides, there is no extended consideration of wine in Elias's work.

Conceptually, however, Elias has much to offer to how we understand wine, and food, and consumption more broadly. For my own part, I have found his interrelated concepts of established/outsider relations, functional democratization, and diminishing contrasts/increasing varieties to have been incredibly useful for making micro- and macro-sociological sense of changing regimes of good taste, and the changing composition of the wine world elite, via past research on fine wine media (Smith Maguire 2018b), media representations of Chinese wine consumption (Smith Maguire & Lim 2015), and the development of a fine wine culture in China (Smith Maguire 2017; Smith Maguire & Zhang 2017). The focus below, in contrast, is the Eliasian conceptualization of human interdependence. I draw from my research on natural wine to discuss how an Eliasian sociology of food focuses attention on the ways in which humans engage with the problems of interdependence. In doing so, I outline the features of a common disposition among the natural wine proponents I have interviewed, suggesting that their shared quest for interconnectedness—expressed through a vitalist, reparative, figurational aesthetic—not only makes the cultural production of natural wine possible, but also constitutes a more reality-congruent, ecologically-sound collective self-image.

Natural wine

By 'natural wine' I am referring to wines that are made under such banners as biodynamic, organic, sustainable and permaculture winegrowing and winemaking. The wines are regarded by their producers and intermediaries as a counterpoint to the mainstream production of wine (and goods more generally), a position often captured in the ethos of grapes to glass, with as little interference as possible. In this way, natural wines occupy a niche not only within the field of wine, but also within the wider field of food, alongside other artisanal food and drink goods.

We certainly should not take the claim to naturalness at face value—if only because *all* wine is 'natural' in that it comes from an agricultural crop—but these wines are nevertheless produced in ways that differ sharply from the post 1950s norms of chemical-intensive, extractive agriculture and the dominant ideology of market growth at all costs. Natural wines are made from grapes that are typically grown without chemical fertilizers, herbicides or pesticides. Hand-pruning and -picking are the norm; hand-tilling and horse-drawn ploughs are common. Similarly in the cellar: mechanical and chemical interventions are minimized or avoided altogether; for example, no added sulphur, which is a common agent for stabilizing and preserving wine. Natural wine vineyards thus tend to look different, indeed even 'wild.' For almost all of the producers and intermediaries I have interviewed, the environmental sustainability upsides of such practices are secondary; this approach to winegrowing and wine making is first and foremost about expressing a wine's connection with where it came from and how it came to be.

Advocates of this approach say that it generates distinctive attributes: wines that offer a greater sense of typicity, transparency, and taste. There are also, however, significant dangers and challenges for producers and intermediaries, which are important to bear in mind.

For producers: giving up the tools of industrial agriculture risks decreasing productivity and increasing vulnerability to crop failure and spoilage. Adopting new (or very old) methods such as hand-picking and -tilling increases the need for manual labour and restricts scale. Other practices associated with biodynamic principles, such as following the lunar calendar and viewing the entire farm as an organism, can attract scorn (or even accusations of witchcraft; Kington 2022), and viewed as not merely retrograde but anti-scientific nonsense. Abandoning the maximization of predictable yields can also spark intergenerational conflict and financial disruption, as when a new generation takes over their parents' wineries and the parents' wines' flavours, price points and client lists are abandoned, as part of shifting to more natural methods.

There are risks, too, for the wines' intermediaries. At their most extreme, natural wines often look, smell and taste different to what is expected, which can create confusion and dismay. In addition, low-yield, handcrafted wines tend to come with a premium price tag, the justification for which is not necessarily obvious on the label or in the glass. So, importers, distributors, retailers, and restaurateurs who stock these wines therefore take on additional work: small volumes entail greater challenges with managing stock, the wines may be less resilient to the indignities of freight transport, and the intensive labour of hand selling is often essential. (While beyond the scope of the chapter, consumers thus also face distinctive challenges in understanding and assessing the quality and value of natural wines.)

With those challenges in mind, we are faced with a puzzle: *why* do producers and intermediaries make and sell natural wine? And why do they *resolutely* do so, as they shun mainstream wine as mass-produced, manipulated, industrial, homogeneous, commercial, and bad for the soul?

Homo clausus and homines aperti

In exploring the 'how and why' questions of natural wine, what I hear from my many and globally varied respondents suggests that the social relations (the how and why) of natural wines are best understood in terms of a deeply felt sense of, and quest for, interconnectedness. This brings me back to Elias, and his contrasting concepts of *homo clausus* (a view of the individual as a closed off, static entity) and *homines aperti* (a view of the individual as open and socially interdependent). The figure of *homo clausus* forms part of the critique of process reduction that runs across Elias's work; I have found *homines aperti* to be a happy fruit of that critique, and very useful for

understanding the 'why' of natural wine. Picking up on these ideas, I have elsewhere proposed a companion pairing of concepts in relation to wine (Smith Maguire 2021): *vinum clausum* (a view of wine as a closed off, static entity) and *vina aperta* (wine as open, emergent and socially interdependent). These concepts help make particular sense of the structures of feeling that characterize what respondents say about their engagement with natural wine. They are also useful for understanding producer and intermediary perceptions and practices as something *other* than, and certainly *more than* the usual foci of distinction, connoisseurship, market differentiation, and premiumization that characterize mainstream academic study of the wine market.

First, let us consider the notion of *homo clausus*. In *What is Sociology* (1970: 14), Elias offers a diagram of concentric circles representing society's layers (family, school, industry, state), at the centre of which is the individual ego ('Me'). This image is intended to capture how humans are typically conceptualized in both everyday life and in social science: a 'myth' of the closed-off, fully formed, complete (that is, static), autonomous, sovereign actor. Since the Renaissance, this idea of the 'individual beyond society' (Elias 1978: 250)—the 'we-less I' (Elias 1998: 232)—has taken hold in Western philosophy, language, and literature (with Sartre, Woolf and Camus among its promoters; Elias 1978: 253; 1998: 232-33). It is a myth that cannot conceive of, nor admit to, the fundamental interdependence of humans. And while we have, for the most part, managed to let go of the geocentric myth of the earth at the centre of the universe, we still cling to this ego-centric myth of humans, in part because it is emotionally reassuring, with each of us the gravitational centre of our biographic universe. Furthermore, the spatial metaphor of inside/outside that underpins *homo clausus* is sustained on a daily, if not moment-to-moment, basis through the lived experience of keeping some aspects of oneself 'bottled up' inside. That is, the idea of *homo clausus* is a logical consequence of the civilizing process and the increasing internalization of affective self-control: it represents what it feels like to be a self, caught inside a 'shell' (Elias 1978: 253), who cannot let their true feelings or identity out. The problem is that we have mistaken our affective distanciation for *actual* distance (Elias 1978: 256), and thus gotten stuck in our inability to perceive that our humanness, and indeed our *individuality*, are only possible in and through relationships with others (Elias 1970: 113).

The corollary in the wine field is a *vinum clausum* mode of thinking about wine as a closed, static object, the production and consumption of which are treated as finite events that are calculable and predictable, specific to a discrete set of actors and factors. For example, research on organic wine purchasing intentions and behaviours (e.g., Bonn et al 2016; Lu et al 2019; Rojas-Méndez et al 2015; Schäufele et al 2018) segments consumers in order to identify the degree to which favourable attitudes, purchase intentions, and willingness to pay a premium for organic wine are explained by level of wine involvement, health consciousness, interest in environmental sustainability, price sensitivity and so forth. *Vinum clausum* and *homo clausus* are, of course, interlinked: such research regards the bottled wine as an objectively stable thing that is apprehended by segments of *homo clausus* consumers. Yet, research questions and designs that hinge on drinkers as closed, sovereign bodies tell us little about how people actually engage with these wines 'in the wild' of their everyday lives. *Vinum clausum* accounts bear little resemblance to my research data.

As Elias repeatedly noted, the myth of *homo clausus* is an impediment (1970; 1978: 245-63). On the one hand, it is an impediment to understanding our fundamental interdependence, and thus an impediment to actually addressing knotty problems of interdependence, such as those becoming increasingly apparent through climate destabilization and the mass extinction event, on the cusp of which we are now anxiously perched. On the other hand, clinging to the notion of a

'we-less I' is also a serious impediment to human emotional fulfilment. It impedes people's ability to satisfy their fundamental need for experiencing 'genuine feelings' and 'genuine emotional bonds' (Elias 1998: 234). Feelings of 'we-lessness', of loneliness and isolation, are not something that *just happens* to plague *some* of us; it is a collective 'habitus problem' (Elias 1998: 234). A key generative mechanism of that habitus problem is, and remains, the myth of *homo clausus*.

We therefore need an alternative self-image—a different way to think about ourselves and each other, that is both more reality-congruent *and* more emotionally satisfying than *homo clausus*. A way of thinking, speaking, and researching that enhances our ability to perceive, enact and nurture our interdependence with others; one that understands people as 'pluralities' in Elias's words, 'within networks of interdependencies' (Elias 1978: 261). This brings us to the second, paired concept from Elias: *homines aperti*. From this perspective, humans are understood as mutually interdependent with, open towards, and connected to others through a myriad of 'valencies' that are reflective of basic human problems of interdependence (Elias 1970: 15, 135). In contrast to the ego at the centre of concentric societal layers, Elias offers a network-like diagram (1970: 15)[1], with individual egos represented as circles, each with a host of arrows extending outwards, some of which are connected to other egos (in a 'more or less unstable balance of power'; 1970: 15), and some of which remain open or unattached. Those valencies (arrows) reach out for interconnectedness, and reflect potential bonds of many sorts, from those associated with the division of labour and group identities, to the emotional, affective needs that we each have to give and receive love and recognition (1970: 175n).

This image of humans attempts to make clear that the individual cannot be extracted from society. *However*, thinking of the self as plural and open, as but one part of larger whole, is not a habit we currently have in the West. We therefore need to find a way to develop our 'imaginative capacity' (Elias 1978: 263) to think in figurations if we are to overcome the bad habits and impediments associated with the myth of *homo clausus*.

Vina aperta

Here enters *vina aperta*. Riffing off Elias, I propose this as a way to characterize how research respondents think about natural wine, and think about themselves in relation to natural wine (Smith Maguire 2021). In the respondents' own accounts of what they love about natural wine, about *how* they bring it to market and *why* they go to such troubles to do so, I see indications of what Elias means by *homines aperti*: not as an abstract understanding of who humans are, developed from the detached standpoint of the sociologist, but as a lived understanding of, and quest for interconnectedness.

To say that the winemakers and intermediaries I have interviewed, who devote their efforts to making natural wine happen, share a *vina aperta* way of thinking is not meant to romanticize them. Aspects of instrumental economic rationality are also in evidence in the ways respondents assess routes to market, calculate what price the market will bear, and so forth: a commitment to a 'taste of place' involves both aesthetic *and* economic logics (Smith Maguire & Charters 2021). Nevertheless, natural wine proponents have a way of thinking about wine and social relations that grasps (if not also explicitly *celebrates*) wine as a changeable, processual thing, and prizes natural wine as a way in to experiencing humans' interdependent relations with the world, with others and with themselves. And in turn, natural wine provides a crucible for making a habit of thinking in figurations, in terms of the basic problems of social interdependence (Elias 1970; Goudsblom 1977). Let me say a bit more about each of these 'problems' in turn.

First, *vina aperta* involves a quest for experiences of interdependent relations with *the physical world*. As an agricultural product, *all* wine is located at a nexus of always-entwined natural and cultural forces. Natural wine, however, renders that nexus palpable; its advocates and interlocutors make it explicit that wine is the outcome of both conscious human decisions of how to work in, and with, and through 'nature', and of the non-human actors involved in co-creating the resultant grape harvest and wine. Soil, grapevines, worms, and various plants and microorganisms, including the 'wild' yeast spores on the grape skins that will drive fermentation: these are explicitly acknowledged as active, vital partners in the creation of wine, and are granted (some) control and credit. In this sense, a *vina aperta* way of thinking and being also tends to be an ecologically-supportive one, going beyond non-interference to actively contributing to an 'ecosystem's health and capacity to sustain itself' (Kasper 2009: 320).

Here is a typical example of the attention to the interconnections with the physical world, in the words of a restaurateur who specializes in natural and biodynamic wines:

> The more we are in balance with nature the better the experience is going to be for you. Natural wines, they're on a higher vibration. With a natural wine, we get to see what's going on in the vineyard, what's going on behind your back. You can trace it all the way down. It makes sense.

In general, respondents talk about natural wines as having more energy, and being good for the soul; about the soil as a living thing; about wine's capacity to transmit a taste of place. This is a vitalist aesthetic, à la Benedetto Croce's notion of aesthetics as being alive to the 'pure throb of life' (Croce 1964: 557). But, unlike the 18th century vitalists, research respondents draw fuzzier boundaries between the animate and inanimate.

It is also a reparative aesthetic, in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's sense of being attuned to a 'heartbeat of contingency' and oriented to 'a magnetic sense of the real' (Sedgwick 2003: 147, 175), that seeks out pleasure and nourishment (137). Such an aesthetic differs sharply from the normative, hegemonic 'paranoid imperative' that has a nasty habit of sneering at anything oriented to joy and beauty and regarding it as naïve (Sedgwick 2003: 126, 137, passim).

Furthermore, it is a figurational aesthetic, seeking out and perceptive of the gestalt of nature and culture. One recalls Elias, writing of Goethe's 'idea that nature has neither core nor shell and that in her there is neither inside nor outside. This is true of human beings as well' (Elias 1978: 259). I would add, it is true also of what natural wine respondents in my research are explicitly seeking.

Second, *vina aperta* involves a quest for experiences of interdependent relations with *other humans*. Of course, natural wine has no monopoly on *vina aperta* experiences, as we might readily think of the sociality and conviviality that often mark the shared consumption of wine. Nevertheless, natural wine has particular attributes that amplify the experience of social interconnectedness, through that vitalist, reparative, figurational aesthetic.

This quest for human interconnectedness often takes on a pre-modern sensibility of embedded, personal relationships, that are able to overcome or supersede the disembedded norms and structures of market exchange (Smith Maguire, Ocejo & DeSoucey 2022; Sassatelli & Scott 2001). For example, intermediary respondents rarely rely on, and often explicitly mistrust certifications, such as organic production certifications. Instead, they insist on personal knowledge of producers. For example, this sommelier describes how she establishes the credentials of the producers on her wine menu, pointing to names on the wine list:

> *I* visited them or I'm in touch with the wine maker. It's the type of people I can call. [she looks at the wine list, and points out names] I've known *him* for five years; I did a harvest with *them*; I know *them*. [finishes pointing] *I know them*.

As respondents repeatedly tell me, they don't just know the wines; they know the people. They explain the lengths they go to get to know the mindset of their producers and the ethos of production. I would suggest that this is not simply about investigating the wines, or the humans who make the wines: it is the work of establishing a community, a 'we' of shared values as a basis for trust and exchange.[2] That sense of we-ness is fundamentally tied to their shared vitalist, reparative, figurational aesthetic. As John Levi Martin puts it in his account of social aesthetics:

> When 'we get it'…we focus on the 'it,' the object in question, and the beauty as a quality of this object. But, when we get the 'it,' we get the 'we' as well, in the sense of establishing a presumption of like-mindedness with those of similar taste. (Martin 2021: 203)

These are people who find each other, trust each other, exchange with each other, because they all 'get it.' And a shared sense of 'getting it' is a fundamental element of a we-identity.

Third, *vina aperta* involves a quest for experiences of interdependent relations of humans *with themselves*, through people's relationships to their own embodiment. For all of the respondents, there is first and foremost a quest for taste: not in the sense of a *particular* flavour or structure of the wine *per se*, but a quest for wines that invite a focused attention of tasting. Another sommelier explains:

> My environmental interest has grown, and I'd love to say yes it's important, but originally it was purely hedonistic: it's about finding more interesting wines. …They taste like the grapes. So, it's taste, but it's also that it's got more for you to engage with. What's more real than that? What's more interesting than that?

Indeed, it is worth underlining that the focus on taste is what drives the transition to more ecologically-sustainable forms of viticulture and winemaking. That is, natural wine's environmental benefits (e.g., fostering biodiversity in vineyards through cover crops, complementary plantings, and rejection of chemical fertilizers and pesticides) are a secondary concern and happy by-product of the determination to make, to sell, and to drink wines that best reflect their specificity of place, or *terroir*.

Thus, tasting—not as abstract expertise, but as passionate engagement—is central to a *vina aperta* disposition. Many of the respondents in my research are wine experts and professionals: credentialled winemakers and sommeliers, and all involved with wine in their professional (that is, occupational) lives. However, what best characterizes their engagement with wine is the notion of the *amateur*. As Geneviève Teil has argued, *amateur* experiences hinge not on expertise, or accredited skill and knowledge, but on an 'extreme and central interest in perception' (Teil 2021: 139; see also Teil & Hennion 2004). The application of a vitalist, reparative, figurational aesthetic requires a seriousness of attention, because what is sought is not readily captured in a simple sip, in the text on a label, or via distracted or blasé drinking.

This heightened nature of paying attention runs across the respondents. It is necessitated by wines that, at their most extreme, look, smell and taste different to what is expected: they might be cloudy, have aromas of barnyard or a spritziness on the tongue, or simply taste different to what people—from everyday folk to wine show judges—have come to expect about certain grape varieties made into certain kinds of wine in certain parts of the world. Part of the pleasure is thus 'tasting (for) difference', be it the distinctiveness of a specific wine, the variation between different wines, and/or the difference between natural and 'mainstream' wines.

For growers and makers of natural wine, we might also note the ways in which they require and acquire new or different ways of paying attention, forms of perception, and modes of attuning to the soil, vines, and other forces (Smith Maguire 2018a). Abandoning the use of herbicides and tractors, encouraging and utilizing complementary plants to control pests and improve soil, coming to regard earthworms and soil as active partners in winemaking, learning to see *terroir* as an actor, rather than as a source or a consequence: these are all forms of self-interdependence, relying on particular kinds of senses—and engagement with those senses—in order to be possible. Moreover, in order to be effective as practices, such modes of perception and practice must become embodied as part of one's 'ecological habitus' (Kasper 2009). Again, natural wine helps to bring this dimension into focus. Learning to articulate, defend, and operationalize a *sense of duty* to one's *terroir* (and/or to one's soil, worms, descendants, planet) requires particular modes of paying attention, different palates for detecting uncommon flavours of success, novel tastes of and for market relations that do not comply with contemporary conventions.

Making a habit of homines aperti thinking

An Eliasian sociology of food is one that is focused on the fundamental problems of social interdependence. In the preceding section, I used this framework to analyze the specific example of natural wine. In doing so, I have tried to demonstrate some of the ways in which natural wine is not only 'good to think with', but also good to *feel* with, for teasing out humans' fundamental interconnectedness and making it tangible, comprehensible, and emotionally compelling. *Vina aperta* and the vitalist, reparative, figurational aesthetic of the respondent producers and intermediaries constitute an especially apt lens through which to examine human interdependencies with the natural world, each other, and ourselves, to grasp the processual nature of cultural production and consumption, and to study social life in situ in ways that do justice to who we are, and who we might be, in the company of our human and non-human others.

Let me reiterate a caveat: this is not just about natural wine (or artisanal food and drink more generally). *All* wine has the potential to offer experiences (of production, intermediation, and consumption practices; of tasting and drinking; of abstract and sensory knowledge) through which people may acquire habits that avoid binary nature/culture oppositions, that reject the treatment of nature as a static resource, and that render one's interconnectedness with one's own senses, fellow creatures, and wider physical world as tangible and legible. This is potentially true not only of all wine, but also of all agricultural products and more generally of all physical products. Nevertheless, the 'natural' wine approach helps foreground human interdependence with the physical world, by explicitly paying attention to non-human agents and their contributions to the process and product. Working with, not on, the soil, the grapevines, the worms, the various plants and microorganisms: all of this makes it difficult, if not impossible to regard the physical world as simply a neutral resource from which value is extracted. Likewise with experiences of interconnectedness with others and with oneself: natural wine has no monopoly on these experiences, but they are heightened because a we-identity is linked to an aesthetic that prizes the concerted effort of paying attention to the throb of life, the flux and flow of process, the pleasures of sensory perception.

As such, I'd suggest that artisanal food and drink goods such as natural wine are especially (but not exclusively) potent opportunities for people to develop new habits of *homines aperti* thinking, addressing the habitus problem of *homo clausus*. Experiences and expressions of a shared vitalist, reparative, figurational aesthetic offer a crucible, developing in the here and now, for thinking in figurations. For some people (such as my respondents), natural wine constitutes a figuration in

which to develop a taste and a palate for thinking processually. Ideals of affirming pleasure and vitality, and a quest for wines that are genuinely connected to place, lead to ways of wine growing and making that tend to be more environmentally sustainable: a reparative aesthetic for which forms of regenerative agriculture are taste-led consequences. In this way, a *vina aperta* disposition offers an example of the environmentally-supportive ecological habitus that Debbie Kasper (2009) has outlined, and of the sort of ecologically utopian collective fantasy image that John Lever (this collection) has called for.

The habitus problem of *homo clausus* is not just about loneliness and alienation. It is a myth that underpins problematic ideas of property and value, which rely on a false sense of the self (one's body, possessions, needs) as entirely separable from 'the rest.' The myth of the 'we-less I' abstracts a beneficiary from his/her figuration, obstructing recognition of collective, social context, contribution, and needs. It is a myth that pretends that we are and remain separate, even as we inhabit the world—as if that world were not us, coextensive with us, from our gut biome to our urban and rural environments. It is a myth that has long prevented us from anticipating (even as we now belatedly recognize) the interdependence of humans within natural-social figurations—a blind spot that has enabled, if not directly fuelled, chemical intensive, extractive agriculture and livestock practices.

As Sophie Dubuisson-Quellier has recently argued, a consumer culture oriented to sufficiency rather than affluence 'cannot arise without the development of a new consumption governance regime able to place sufficiency rather than affluence at the core of the process of social and economic value creation' (2022: 45). I wholeheartedly agree. But a new governance regime must be accompanied by a new internal personality structure, as per Elias's key insight that 'long-term changes of social structure and personality structure' are intertwined (1978: 245). In short: how can we possibly transition to more sustainable social structures if people still think of themselves in *homo clausus* terms? This is not simply about needing a new infrastructure for society; it is also about nurturing a new 'image of the personality' (Elias 1978: 245), in which humans are open and interconnected individuals fully interdependent with the world.

The myth of *homo clausus* took hold over the long-term, championed by Sartre, Woolf, Camus (Elias 1978: 253; 1998: 232-33), and concretized in our everyday patterns of speech. The habituation of a *homines aperti* collective self-image requires a new cadre of cultural legitimators, storytellers, guides, and artists. And perhaps we have some of this already, with role models of *vina aperta* thinking among the natural wine producers and intermediaries. We need charismatic leaders who prize and celebrate interdependence; we need more emotionally satisfying fables of we-ness that help to dislodge *homo clausus* thinking from its taken-for-granted post as the dominant image of the individual. Such beacons might help us to recover some balance between I- and we-identities (Elias 1998: 231-32); to recognize restraint and interdependence not as a hardship or loss for *homo clausus*, but as a gain for *homines aperti*; to form a habit of thinking not for one, but of us all.

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Endnotes

[1] To my eye, the diagram resembles a circuit diagram or transport map; Stephen Mennell remembers Eric Dunning's impression of it as 'the false teeth' diagram!

[2] While I am here emphasizing the dimension of interconnectedness, one should not romanticize the natural wine 'community' as one of infinite harmony. There are certainly established/outsider relations and asymmetrical power struggles, such as those played out between generations, regions, and production methods; however, in my experience, such internal divisions are relatively porous in comparison to the much sharper divides within the field of fine wine, where natural wine may be positioned as part of the established, legitimate elite (e.g., the world's finest Burgundian pinot noir producer has long been biodynamic) or part of the outsider, illegitimate mass (e.g., 'natural' wine as crass marketing).