

Fermenting Cultures

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This special issue of *Cultural Analysis* deals with a topic closer to us than almost any other. Nevertheless, at the time this journal was founded, now a quarter of a century or even ten years ago, it would hardly have been expected in a journal dedicated to the study of culture. But this is precisely why “In Relation to Microbes” is a concern that is almost prototypical for the ways of thinking and working of an anthropologically informed cultural analysis, as it directs our attention to a world that surrounds us as a matter of course (actually: also fills us), but which remains strangely distant and invisible to us. On the one hand, this is a special attraction—a *terra incognita* quasi in our immediate vicinity—but also a special challenge. Dealing with microbial relations and the practices of their everyday negotiation, whether in the kitchen, garden, or cellar, or our thinking about health, sustainability, and the good life, also touches on our ideas of the boundaries of human, cultural, and scholarly competencies.

I, therefore, take the fittingly wonderfully ambiguous title “Fermenting Cultures” as an opportunity to comment on the thematic issue on three levels. To the two perhaps more obvious dimensions of fermenting cultures (in the sense of “natural” processes, 1) and cultures of fermentation (in the sense of “cultural” interactions 2), I would like to add a third

aspect that is of particular concern to me: “Fermenting Cultures” should also be understood here as a dimension of the epistemological and methodological incubation of our engagement in the field of culture 3).

1. Fermenting Cultures: Shedding Light on the Overlooked Cultures

There is a lot to learn from the six articles in this issue. First, the breadth and relevance of the topic are addressed in this volume. It does not claim to be exhaustive or present only random excerpts. Rather, this issue succeeds in a good cultural-anthropological manner in not only illuminating exemplary fields with significance beyond the individual case in-depth but also in opening up connecting contexts with its general and conceptual discussions. I cannot go into the individual contributions. Still, I consider their compilation very successful because, with different cultures (in one sense), they also reach different places, social spheres, etc., and, thus, cultures (in the other sense). And this already captures a very important characteristic of microbiological cultures: They are omnipresent, but they only show themselves (at least to us and for analysis) situationally and in relationships. It is important and right that the contributors are interested in the knowledge of vernacular biology, and have an eye for the “how?”: how it is talked and thought about, how bodies and senses are involved in these trans-species interrelations and make the other imaginable and negotiable.

It is also important to be reminded of where microbial relations are at work (in addition to the trends of fermenting food and drinks hyped in social media) and

how differently they work. The contributions are prime examples of ethnographic research that has grown in sensitivity and differentiation in recent years. We see this in the trans-disciplinary research of anthropology, science, and technology studies with biologists and nutritionists exploring topics such as Icelandic skyr dairy, composting in the garden, managing the bokashi bucket, networks of permaculture activists and sourdough bakers, or the indeed microbiologically infused Bulgarian oikos.

2. Fermenting Cultures: Understanding Cultures of Fermentation

This issue also demonstrates the progress of our disciplines—and transdisciplines—compared to the concepts and working methods of a few decades ago. The study of food and drink, its production and preservation, has had a long tradition in the anthropological disciplines, not least with a special shape in European ethnology and folklore. The techniques and ideas of agricultural production have also been widely dealt with. These subjects have always been interested in more-than-human life, at least indirectly. But when they dealt with the culture of animals or plants, even at the end of the 20th century—which, of course, was very innovative at the time—then it was mostly about ways in which (active) subjects and collectives dealt with a (passive) more or less natural counterpart. At best, this was understood as a construction of the shape of nature through culture and, thus, as a questioning of the clear boundaries of such orders of knowledge in modernity. However, the extent to which our thinking is captured in this has often been largely overlooked.

In this respect, the texts collected here penetrate new dimensions thanks to their cultural (and today, that means gender and knowledge theory) information. And, one might almost say paradoxically, they also come closer to the anthropological core concerns of understanding culture and society. What I particularly like about these contributions is that they do not blindly follow the microbiological trail but instead use it and the understanding of human-microbiotic collaboration to understand how this shapes social relationships and a general being-in-the-world. This perspective has dimensions regarding family, kinship, and society but also has an explicitly temporal dimension. Therefore, to understand the temporalities in these ways of thinking and acting, an expanded conception of historicity, which understands the mobilization of historical knowledge in the respective present as negotiated practices of shaping the future, is also helpful. This expansion becomes particularly clear in the contributions in which power relations are explicitly addressed and the political aspects of symbiotic care work are analyzed. In this respect, however, we should deepen our research on such topics; the interface with *Critical Heritage Studies* and an *Anthropology of the Future* seems to me to be particularly fruitful.

3. Fermenting Cultures: Microbiology as a Catalyst for Anthropological Thought and Work

The papers collected here each make an important contribution to a more diverse imaginable nature and, thus, at least indirectly, to an expansion of our cultural-analytical spectrum of cognition and its workings. In other words, “Fermenting

Cultures” are also something like incubators of our epistemologies and methodological dispositions. In my view, the contributions show one thing very well: the preoccupation with bacteria and fungi, with “cultures” (which, as a participial derivation of the verb *colere* in the Latin sense of the word, means something well-tended), is what makes the study of humanity complete. This approach does so paradoxically by simultaneously de-centering the human and completing it in its environmental and social relationships. Without cooperation with microbes, we cannot sour milk, regenerate the rare soil in our Nordic front yard, or politically remobilize old forms of solidarity in peripherized regions in the so-called Capitalocene. And perhaps, despite the proverbial “two cultures” (C. P. Snow), which repeatedly thwart the required interdisciplinary between the sciences and the humanities, they will also help us to rethink their boundaries and shared interests in the face of planetary crises.

However, getting out of our sometimes fairly harmless comfort zone seems important. Perhaps it is significant that, in turning to the elementary and vernacular, we move primarily in our milieus of an ecologically sensitive, educated world or, at least, seek its values in other fields. As fruitful as it may be to encounter rural farms, our kitchens and gardens (or Sardinian wastelands and Bulgarian storage cellars) with the conceptual apparatuses of science and technology studies, this attention to small-scale ways of dwelling and care practices could also distract us from the regimes and technologies that still determine our existence alongside such niches. It is, therefore, important that we open our gaze even wider in future research and take our critical ethno-

graphic and cultural-analytical inspection to places where the industrialized and digitalized (AI-fueled) wind of “pasteurization” (B. Latour) continues to blow unchecked (albeit in an ambivalent guise!) and sometimes knowingly puts people and the environment under pressure. Dealing with antibiotic resistance and increasing allergies, the eco-digital regimes of the new precision farming are just as much a part of this subject area as dependencies and inequalities in the global beverage industry, to give just a few.

This extension is also about the benefits of a post-human perspective for anthropology as a human science, which should not be accused of anthropocentrism (and “culturalism”) without a price. Despite all the criticism, it is, moreover, what characterizes our view of the social and wider world and constitutes our analytical capacity. I think that if we consistently develop the challenge of relational cultural analysis further by approaching other scales and politics of macrobiotic relationships with the same seriousness and attention to ruptures and contradictions, we can, once again, contribute to an (if one may say so) post-human humanization of human science. This engagement includes the small-scale and “subjectivization,” but no less the interweaving of different scalings, in which microbes participate but are not the sole players.