FOOD

Power to the microbes: Reclaiming traditional foods for a degrowth food future

By: Christiane Heisse , Sevgi Mutlu Sirakova 09.12.2024

Share on the corporate technosphere

Our republication policy

Crusty Bread, creamy cheese, bubbly kimchi or refreshing tepache – all cultures have fermented foods and beverages with their own traditions, language, and cultural heritage surrounding them. Fermentation, in this sense, is a living food culture that taps into ancient skills and traditional knowledge. But this knowledge is under attack. As capitalism continues its onslaught on rural, indigenous, communal, and non-commodified ways of life, traditional food practices are slowly dying out in the contexts in which they originally emerged. The modern food system has mostly outsourced food preservation to factories and big corporations. Rather than making fermented staple foods ourselves, many of us today have to sell our labor power to earn money and buy fermented products in a store.

At the same time, there is a resurgence in interest in traditional fermentation methods among the urban middle classes. The so-called 'fermentation revival' sees a renewed interest in ancient practices, but it is unclear to what extent this trend connects the dots to the structural reasons why they had been eroded in the first place. Meanwhile, venture capitalists are investing billions of dollars into fermentation-based food startups, whether in search of new

probiotics or to develop lab-grown meat. In this context, we believe that politicizing and reclaiming traditional fermentation practices has a key role to play in shifting towards a degrowth food system. Here are three reasons why.

The original sustainable food system

First, historically, food preservation practices like fermentation have been inherently low-tech. While new technologies can certainly have a place in the degrowth transition, a sustainable food system should, first and foremost, build on sustainable practices that already exist. And when it comes to food preservation, there is hardly a process that has been around for longer than fermentation. Archaeological research suggests that humans have been fermenting food for thousands of years, dating back even before the beginnings of agriculture.

This means that fermentation practices carry essential survival skills that have allowed us to keep produce through the seasons, slow down the process of rot, and even increase the nutritional value of our food for millennia. Because traditional methods of fermentation have evolved out of ancient practices, they do not require any electricity or fancy equipment. A few ingredients, some labor, and time are all that is needed. This makes them an important piece of the puzzle when envisioning a low-energy food system that centers on locality and seasonality away from the supply chains of big agribusiness.

Seeing the invisible

Second, fermentation allows us to grasp biodiversity on many levels in intricate ways. Watching cabbage turn into kimchi, milk into yogurt, or grapes into wine is a truly magical process that reveals the otherwise invisible microorganisms that prepare our food for us. By showing that microbes are everywhere - in us, on us, and around us - it is a powerful reminder that humans are part of nature and not separate from it. In this way, thinking with fermentation can help us to foster a holistic understanding of biodiversity. For example, research on yogurt-making in Bulgaria found a striking difference between commercial and homemade yogurts. The scientists discovered that homemade yogurts contained 76 different strains of lactic acid bacteria (LAB), while store-bought 'live yogurt' typically includes only two strains, mostly supplied by lab-grown monocultures. This highlights how traditional fermentation methods preserve the skills and knowledge needed to cultivate microbial biodiversity. In contrast, microbial monocultures in industrial

production reflect the broader commodification of seeds and other food sources for efficiency gains and profit.

Recognizing these overlooked aspects of biodiversity is especially important to contextualize blanket recommendations for a 'sustainable diet,' such as those found in the EAT Lancet report. While it is true that what we eat matters, the question of how food is grown and prepared also has important implications for our health and environment. Recent microbiome studies further complicate this relationship. We have co-evolved with microbes that shape fermented foods and our microbiome. It is no surprise that science continues to uncover the benefits of probiotics in fermented foods. Embracing the biocultural heritage of fermentation is therefore crucial to ensure diverse, local alternatives that support a viable and just degrowth transition.

Thinking with microbes for a degrowth food system

Third, fermentation is relevant to many degrowth considerations beyond just environmental ones. These include decentralization, care, justice, and a redistribution of resources like land, money, or time. For example, traditional fermentation practices are often more time-intensive than the methods many people in the West and in urban settings currently use to feed themselves. The Covid lockdowns showed that, with more time available, people returned to practices of sustenance – remember the sourdough craze? This reinforces practical calls for reallocating time, such as the push for a four-day work week, which has long been a demand for degrowth visions in the Global North.

At the same time, fermentation empowers those who grow or forage their own food to preserve it, reducing food waste and enabling sharing within their communities. This ties directly to the fact that preparing and eating fermented foods has historically been a communal activity. Can we imagine a celebration without fermented drinks or foods? Sharing and conviviality around fermentation are strong antidotes to the isolating pressures of neoliberal capitalism. It only makes sense, then, that such traditional fermentation practices should be amplified and celebrated as we transition towards a degrowth-oriented food system.

There is no doubt that if we are serious about degrowth, our global food system is due an overhaul. Diverse visions exist for the paths of production (towards smaller-scale and decentralized agroecology), and consumption (towards seasonal, local, and plant-based diets, and equal access to nutritious food for all). Traditional modes of food preservation lay a strong bridge connecting the two spheres as we think about a degrowth vision for the 'in-between' space of

cooking, food preservation, and storage. A jar of Sauerkraut then acts like a magnifying glass which – intellectually and materially – brings together many of the big questions about the global political economy of food in a small container.

Degrowth has been criticized for being 'heavily European-centered, and overly academic'. Moving forward, the movement should engage more directly with the many hands-on ways in which many people around the world are already keeping the most sustainable practice alive as part of their daily lives. Traditional fermentation practices, essential for self-sufficiency, embody a form of everyday resistance and quiet sustainability, countering the homogenization and commodification of food. A degrowth food system should seek to protect and amplify these myriads of practices so that they can continue to allow humans to thrive and heal our alienated relationship to the ecosystems that sustain us. The work of degrowth is to create material conditions that protect these diverse ways of life and allow them to flourish.

About the authors

Christiane Heisse

Christiane Heisse is a PhD student in development economics at SOAS and a visiting researcher at the LMU Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, interested in the political economy of ecological transition. Aside from her research work, she gives fermentation and pickling workshops in her native Munich.

MORE FROM THIS AUTHOR →

Sevgi Mutlu Sirakova

Sevgi Mutlu Sirakova is a PhD candidate at the LMU Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society in Munich. She is interested in the traditional fermentation practices of her home countries, Bulgaria and Turkey. Her recent project traces old methods of yogurt-making within her own community from an ethnographic perspective.

MORE FROM THIS AUTHOR →

Support us

FOOD

Communal Living – breaking the ice once and for all through food solidarity

By: Lateef Salami

On October 1, 1960, as Nigeria gained independence, the population of the entire country was around 45.1 million. Fast forward to the year 2020, according to U.N, the estimated population of Nigeria is above 206 million. This can be seen as a rapidly exploding population when compared to other nations in Europe like UK (52.2 million in 1960 to 67.9million in year 2020) over the same period of t…

FOOD

Farmers and a degrowth economy in Russia

By: Teodor Shanin

Perspectives from Eastern Europe and particularly Russia are so far underrepresented in degrowth debates. Translated from its original Russian, the piece below showcases an interview with a prominent British-Russian academic, Teodor Shanin, discussing degrowth in the Russian context through the lens of agriculture. Accordingly, it enables new audiences to gain an insight into this underrepresen…

E-Mail:
contact@degrowth.info

Our partners:

Newsletter

Support Us

Library Submission

Connect with us on the corporate technosphere