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AIR BUBBLES

Leavening Agents: Some Meditations on Baking Bread under Lockdown

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*Importuna fames hominem quemcunq; fatigat,
Hic Pistoris opem supplice voce perat.
Ille dabit panem tua quo ieiunia pellas,
Cordis & impasti vim reparare queas.*



*Viscera continuis ubi fracta laboribus arent,
Optimus hæc panis fortificare solet.
Omne genus comedas auium, genus omne ferarum,
Inuenias sapiat quod sine pane nihil.
Artifices igitur multos post terga relinquit,
Istius & cunctos artis egere patet.*

Der Becker (The Baker) from *Panoplia omnium illiberalium mechanicarum ...* (Book of Trades), 1568, British Museum.

A bubble is just gas trapped in liquid, and bread is just bacterial farts trapped in gluten; yet both represent the intersection of Charles Keiffer's perspective on the airborne pandemic currently affecting us all. In this inventive essay, Keiffer muses upon the social implications of the bread-making trend that, like the COVID-19 virus, spread throughout the world.

LEAVENING AGENTS: SOME MEDITATIONS ON BAKING BREAD UNDER LOCKDOWN

Charles Keiffer

Bubbles are a sign of life. Everyone who made or used sourdough starter in the past few months learned this, as did everyone who made bread using store-bought yeast and watched it rest. “Dough is ready when surface is dotted with bubbles,” wrote Mark Bittman in one of New York Times Cooking’s most popular recipes, “No Knead Bread.”¹ In each case, the bubbles represent bacterial farts, trapped in gluten and causing the dough to expand and rise. A bubble is, after all, just gas trapped in liquid, with borders discerned by the surroundings which keep it closed — until it pops.

A loaf of bread is mostly bubbles, trapped in an arrested state by the heat of the (Dutch) oven and popped as we chew, releasing flavor into the back of our throat for satisfaction via retronasal olfaction. Bubbles “live towards their bursting,”² as Peter Sloterdijk writes, and in baking bread we harness and tailor this bursting towards nourishing ends. Food scientist Bruce German notes that eating only flour and water in their raw form will not sustain life past a few weeks, while eating bread can sustain it indefinitely.³ In Egyptian Arabic, the words for bread and life are the same: *aish*, as is noted widely every time there are “bread riots,” or famine caused by economic crisis in the Middle East, such as in 2008 or 1977).⁴ However, the life-giving part of bread is not exactly the bubbles, though the bubbles make the bread possible. The life-giving part is borne of the interaction between gas and solid, an immaculate conception by the trinity of flour, water, and the right kind of air. From this, the single-celled organism called yeast is activated and the bread grows.

Predating written history, bread was the gas before gastronomy. I agree with Pliny when he writes in his *Natural History*, “It seems to me quite unnecessary to enter into an account of the various types of bread that are made.”⁵ Suffice it to say that air is a key ingredient. Even the unleavened flatbread of the Old Testament that lives on in the Passover Story would have had some air trapped in it, but the bubble-dotted surface Mark Bittman’s readers look for would have taken more time than the Israelites had.

Daniel Defoe’s *Journals of the Plague Year: Being Observations or Memorials of the Most Remarkable Occurrences as well Publick as Private which Happened in London During the Great Visitation in 1665*, published in 1722, contains 23 mentions of bread. The text’s narrator, H.F., (likely Defoe’s uncle, Henry Foe, who lived in London during the 1665 outbreak)⁶ notes repeatedly the crucial role of bread in sustaining the populace as “the plague raged so violently among the butchers and slaughter-houses.”⁷ H.F. estimates that about 200,000 Londoners fled to countryside retreats at the onset of the outbreak, abandoning the classes that depended on them for commerce and employment and leaving the city at risk of “being entirely deserted of its inhabitants except the poor.”⁸ In addition to distributing charitable donations, the Mayor of London ordered the Baker’s Guild to “keep their oven going constantly,” so that “bread was always to be had in plenty, and as cheap as usual”⁹ — a seventeenth-century version of a stimulus bill. Throughout, H.F.’s tone is empathetic but detached, observing from within his own economic and personal bubble. Himself a successful and connected tradesman, he is advised by a doctor to avoid public places altogether. “I went and bought two sacks of meal, and for several weeks, having an oven, we baked all our own bread.”¹⁰



my bread journey

The year that Defoe chronicled saw the last outbreak of bubonic plague in England. The death toll began to decline starting in Autumn, and the monarchy and gentry returned from the countryside early the following year. The city they returned to had been kept alive in large part by, in the words of Julian Yates, “the baked or dried-out paste that captures the exhalations of yeast, a microbiopolitical actor just as mysterious as the plague, but more benevolently so.”¹¹

The advice of H.F.’s doctor endures, as do the economic bubbles that determine who can follow it. In the Spring of 2020, an inestimably large number of people around the world with the luxury of time, kitchen-space, and money for extra flour made homemade bread while adjusting to life under lockdown.¹² I was not immune to this trend, producing several disappointing iterations before fathering a loaf that was not too dense, flat, or dry. Like many, I documented much of this journey on social media. The hours spent comparing my loaves to those on my Instagram feed, researching the various ways to combine flour, water, and yeast, and obsessing over the proofing process broke up days that would otherwise bleed into each other, and provided a tactile, sensory experience that took my mind off the deeply disturbing reality of a global pandemic. While the air outside posed a threat whose *modus operandi* was still largely mysterious, rising dough yielded bubbles of air within my jurisdiction. Pregnant with the possibility of satisfaction, my dough prescribed a future of at least a few more hours where it would bake, cool, and be eaten. A popular Twitter thread that I consulted frequently, by Emily Hoven, was titled “How to Make Sourdough at the End of the World,” from March 21, 2020. Hoven, a Ph.D. student in English Literature, demystified the biologically complex process of making sourdough starter with a series of methodical steps that required only the future-oriented virtues of patience and focus, an antidote to apocalyptic thinking.

In a shrewd and subtle call to bread’s potential beyond nutrition, Hoven deliberately titled her thread after art-historian Natalie Loveless’s book, *How to Make Art at the End of the World* (2019).¹³ Positioned between the genre of scholarly monograph and manifesto, Loveless’s project argues for artistic practice, or “research-creation,” as “a site of generative recrafting: a touchstone and orienting point that might help render daily life in the academy more pedagogically, politically, and affectively sustainable.”¹⁴ In other words, for the use of creative and artistic methods to rethink what counts as research, productive output, and learning, within the increasingly stifling neoliberal university and the late-capitalist society outside of it. Loveless’s title is itself a knowing reference to Timothy Morton’s *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (2013), which shows global warming’s effects on the ontology behind big concepts like World and Nature, and their ramifications for thinking futurity. The end of the world for both Loveless and Morton is the certainty of looming environmental crises and the unsustainable growth of neoliberalism.

Hoven, tweeting 10 days after the World Health Organization declared a pandemic, was facing a much more immediate apocalypse in the form of mass deaths and the collapse of the global economy. In this context, she and her followers made sourdough starter, a 7-12 day endeavor that, through fermentation, yields a hungry colony of yeast that require more attention, care, and feeding than most small pets. From what I could see, those who succeeded in gestating the starter went on to partition their colonies among friends and others in their “quarantine bubble.” The adage had been rewritten: Give someone bread and they will eat it in a day; Give them a bit of starter and they will be entertained for a week or more. At this time it felt like a kinder gift to receive a (sanitized) ziploc bag of bubbly beige goo than a loaf of homemade bread.

Meanwhile, those in power continued to behave as they always had, allowing COVID-19 to infect the most vulnerable at disproportionate rates. The numbers of rapidly rising reported deaths obscured these inequalities at the same time that the decimated economy compounded the sense that, even if one survived, there would be no future to look forward to. This sudden intimacy with apocalyptic dread drove a significant number of those with the means to bowls of warm sticky dough seeking comfort, connection through social media, or a fantasy of rustic authenticity and self-reliance.

As it turned out, March 2020 was not the end of the world, and the sharp dry humor in the title of Hoven’s Twitter thread has come to feel dated. The start of summer brought a jolting reminder that many aspects of the world, or at least

the United States, were still solidly rooted. The police murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, and the belated attention given to the murder of Breonna Taylor 73 days prior, popped the solipsistic and hazy bubble that privileged Americans had been living in since the start of the pandemic. The movement that gained national attention with the police murders of Eric Garner and Michael Brown in 2014 and Freddie Gray in 2015, among several others, resurfaced urgently unfinished. Crowds gathered publicly for the first time since February in protests of unprecedented number and size¹⁵ across the United States, which at the time of writing this (July 2020), are continuing daily in some parts of the country, and have successfully prompted budget cuts and reallocated funding from police departments in multiple states, and faced disturbing backlash in others.¹⁶ Many used social media platforms to raise awareness about causes like prison abolition and police reform, movements that will demand continued and sustained engagement in the years to come. As poet Ariana Reines wrote in the July installment of her monthly Artforum column “Confinement led to masses of people finally catching the thought: human beings should not be put in cages. Instagram became a pedagogical tool, rather than merely the matrix of DIY propaganda.”¹⁷

“DIY propaganda” undoubtedly refers to the bread-baking phenomenon of the prior months, which, by June, could not have felt less relevant. We were newly incentivized to confront an inheritance of 300 years of institutionalized racism. Reines’s snark towards the baking posts likely expresses the way many people felt about the craze. Workers deemed essential or otherwise too busy, those with dietary restrictions, disdain for trends, or simple disinterest, and those who were caring for or grieving a loved one or experiencing deteriorating health during lockdown would have likely found the onslaught of baking content on social media obnoxious if not insensitive. I am sympathetic to these reasons and am in no way lamenting the end of the baking-era of 2020 nor the prioritizing of questions of justice and inequality. But where does bread stand now?

We might suppose an extra-titular connection between Hoven’s Twitter thread, “How to Make Sourdough at the End of the World,” and the *Loveless* text that inspired it. Where *Loveless* advocates for artistic or embodied creation as a generative tool for pedagogical, political, and affective possibilities, Hoven’s readers underwent a similar process when baking bread in quarantine. The most obvious of these is the affective, with the future-oriented engagement in fantasy, possibility, and hope that drives a 20+ hour baking project along with the meditative process of kneading and the temporal rhythms of proofing, all of which offset the despair that is a natural reaction to current realities.

Then there is the pedagogical. The bread recipe that ended up producing my ideal loaf came from the economies of knowledge sharing that characterize many online cooking communities. I achieved success through a combination of Mark Bittman’s no-knead recipe and modifications gathered from the comments section; I do all the rises inside the same bowl and add slightly more water for a crispier crust, which worked best considering my oven and the temperature in my kitchen. In spaces such as recipe-sharing Facebook groups, Twitter threads, comments sections, and kitchen conversations between friends sharing a meal, no one inhabits the role of “expert,” and many will have unique tips to share that are seen as equally valuable. This is not to say that these spaces cannot be toxic in other ways, but that they do not reinforce traditional pedagogical models where an expert bestows knowledge onto passive students. Professional chefs or those with advanced culinary training typically do not occupy these spaces. Those who enjoy cooking know that no recipe is immune to improvement, and that food allergies and specific tastes (disliking cilantro, for example), are not personal flaws to be corrected according to externally imposed standards but opportunities for experimentation and improvisation. While what is traditionally considered “knowledge” — historical narratives, scientific findings — can only be questioned by those with the proper qualifications, taste is innate and uniquely personal, and cooking is learned through muscle memory and clumsy experimentation.

This pedagogical model that produces knowledge through improvisation and constant tweaking lends itself to a more just politics as it can accommodate a much greater set of needs and abilities than traditional utilitarian politics and is by nature less hierarchical. “Liberation,” wrote Paulo Freire, “is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it.”¹⁸ To bake bread is to witness transformation, and often experience failure, disappointment,



Emily Hoven
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HOW TO MAKE SOURDOUGH AT
THE END OF THE WORLD: A
THREAD



11:28 PM · 3/21/20 · [Twitter for iPhone](#)

331 Retweets and comments 1,189 Likes



Emily Hoven @emilyhoven · 3/21/20
(title after Natalie Loveless)



and frustration along the way. “It is not a predictable process; it must be undergone,”¹⁹ writes Judith Butler, in a similar vein to Friere, on democracy, though anyone who has tried to make bread would say the same about the experience.

To be clear, I am playing with baking bread as a metaphor for political change here as a strategy for retaining hope and resilience in the face of discouraging and overwhelming developments in the struggle against white supremacy and necrocapitalism, when the virus that drove people to bread in the first place has now become as much a political issue as a public health one. While the experience of living through the coronavirus pandemic has been fractured and dramatically variegated across racial and economic lines, it has still been shared — in the sense that references to it are intelligible, if not relatable — across these lines. And there is still our national pre-existing condition of burnout. Metaphor aside, the flavor of yeasty exhalations can continue to provide sustenance beyond the nutritious. As Vallery Lomas, the first black winner of ABC’s *The Great American Baking Show*, wrote on Instagram on June 1, 2020: “This no-knead rustic loaf is the product of my anger and frustration. Humble as it is, it’s all I could fix my hands to make yesterday. Its crusty existence feels like a victory.”

NOTES

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**People at the beginning
of the quarantine
learning how to make
banana bread on
youtube**



**People 12 weeks
later ready to
abolish the police**



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