

# Extraordinary Ethnographic Encounters in Extraordinary Times. A Plea for Experimental Interventions in More-than-Business Relations

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## Abstract

This contribution reconsiders ethnographic encounters with mainstream market actors in light of the ever-intensifying ecological crisis caused by prevalent patterns of economic activities. Effective experimental interventions in hegemonic configurations of capitalism are hitherto hard to realize due to fundamental incompatibilities between the logic of academic ethnographic work and that of conventional business operations. Viewing the private sector as comprised of interconnections of economic activities and knowledge production diminishes the epistemic pitfalls of such encounters. Based on empirical insights into the food sector, this paper suggests discarding the view of collaborations with economic actors as dyadic. Instead, it makes a case for approaching more-than-business networks that inextricably link knowledge and business practices. Such experimental interventions may tackle three constitutive pillars of contemporary capitalism: relations between localized knowledge practices and overarching discursive forms; relations between formalized expertise and market operations; and relations among conflicting truth claims and value arguments.

**Keywords:** experimental interventions, private sector, food systems, ethnographic collaboration, Anthropocene

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## Introduction

Ethnographers<sup>1</sup> render the failure of contemporary capitalism to sustain life tangible in particularly insightful ways. They depict the conditions for the prevalent patterns of economic activities and their devastating effects to emerge and be stabilized. This epistemic capacity is grounded in decades of theorizing and analyzing the market order of the economy as a historically and politically situated form. Thus, questioning and challenging the naturalization and reification of capitalism is one of the core overarching objectives of many ethnographic inquiries into economic activities (e.g., Tsing 2015; Appel 2019a; Livingston 2019).

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<sup>1</sup> Here the term 'ethnographer' refers to scholars who "map contemporary situations (not cultures)" (Westbrook 2008: 44) by interrelating conversations and encounters (both immediate and synthetic) with interlocutors and social theory.

Against this background, the questions posed by the editors of this volume seem unrelated to ethnographic research on actors and practices at the core of the market economy. Reflections on the role of ethnographic knowledge for the politics and ethics in the fields we investigate have gained momentum in various discussions on forms and formats of cooperating with our interlocutors. However, propositions for experimental and collaborative formats of ethnographic knowledge production decidedly neglect the core of the private sector, for mingling with commercial interests has proven to entail the risk of being submitted to and reproductive of its logics (cf. Suchman 2013). In what follows, I make a proposal that takes these concerns seriously and still goes against the grain of the assumptions that usually arise from them. To be precise, the line of reasoning in this paper contravenes the widely held conjecture that ethnographic knowledge may be generated *about* and not *with* market actors. It is grounded in the conviction that ethnography's potential "to challenge and change existing order, provoking new orderings or subjectivity, society and culture" (Fortun 2012: 450), can and should be mobilized to intervene in and with the private sector. Such experimental engagements are only feasible if the hitherto prevalent "ethics of suspicion" in encountering business is complemented by some aspects of an "ethics of promising" (Fortun 2005). While the former is based on "oppositional critique" (ibid.: 161), the latter strives to initiate interactions that generate constructive outcomes despite differences (ibid.: 170).

Proposing such a shift may seem illusory as long as firms and entrepreneurs are perceived as a somewhat distinct, free-floating kind of actor. However, it may well be possible to craft promising (as 'open-ended and constructive') ethnographic encounters by reconsidering this view. I argue that we should acknowledge, scrutinize and harness the inextricable relationships that link market actors with various experts and practices of knowledge production. Entanglements of business and knowledge constitute a promising point of access for envisaging and designing interventions in the hegemonic arrangements we seek to disrupt. I make this claim based on my ethnographic insights into the food sector – a field of economic activity that is among the most watched and approached by public, academic and political concerns over the urgent need for sustainable change. Thus, the nexus of mainstream agriculture, food manufacturing and logistics is pivotal for the manifold issues associated with the Anthropocene. By drawing on the cases of the conventional rice sector in Uruguay and an alternative food network in Germany, this article discusses the crucial role of business-knowledge entanglements for the enactment of the ethics and subjectivities that undergird or undermine established patterns of economic activities in contemporary food systems. It is precisely this quality of the interconnections of economic and knowledge practices that makes them so critical for ethnographic interventions. Since these interconnections are shaped by epistemic and political concerns, as well as commercial concerns, they are accessible for such interventions despite our well-founded skepticism of collaborating with the private sector.

This contribution drafts a possible agenda for experimental encounters that could vex what is taken for granted as 'business as usual.' I propose designing such encounters around the goal of tinkering with the understanding and arrangement of three kinds of relationships: those between business activities and knowledge production, between localized knowledge practices and broader knowledge regimes, and among divergent truth claims and value arguments. Intervening in these dimensions reconciles the desire for a radical change with the immediate need for reforms.

## Collaborations and Experimental Ethnographic Encounters: Knowledge with Whom?

Broadly speaking, there are two kinds of decidedly collaborative encounters between ethnographers and their interlocutors: those that explicitly and actively intervene in political practice, and those that primarily unfold around the objective of generating knowledge. Guided by the fundamental question “knowledge for whom?” (Hale 2007: 105), activist ethnographers seek to change existing configurations of social injustice, discrimination, repression and oppression. They aim at “participating in the struggle[s]” (Scheper-Hughes 1995: 414) of those who suffer, instead of merely depicting them. Overcoming distance and acting upon one’s complicity is also the goal of epistemic collaborations (Holmes & Marcus 2008). Yet, in this body of work, ethnographic interlocutors are first and foremost considered counterparts in knowledge production. This premise is consequential in as much as it brings particular kinds of actors to the foreground: “public institutions, activist collectives, artistic spaces and laboratories” (Sánchez Criado & Estalella 2018: 1). Doing ethnography in such contexts does not primarily require and afford advocacy but egalitarian engagement and “creative interventions” (ibid.: 2). However, same as in the case of activist ethnography, intervening in the field in such a manner also necessitates at least a basic compatibility of political objectives, ethical principles and value arguments. As most ethnographers are trained in critical social sciences, it is not surprising that we mainly seek to work with interlocutors, whose agendas, reflexivities and visions are assembled around resistance, counter-politics and creativity (see, e.g., Estalella & Criado 2018; Groth & Ritter 2019). In the rare cases when ethnographers actually collaborate with hegemonic institutions, they intervene in practices that at least already aim at compensating for the flaws of the established order (cf. Bieler et al. 2021; Bieler in this volume).

The proposal made in this paper joins the ranks of a few existing attempts of speculating about and reflecting upon occasions to collaborate with actors whose doings are deeply imbricated in hegemonic agendas (cf. Westbrook 2008; Deeb & Marcus 2011; Gilbert 2015). It does so by examining the possibility of engaging with the least common and most counter-intuitive kind of a counterpart: business. While Holmes and Marcus (2008: 83) casually list a pharmaceutical firm among examples of potential epistemic partners for experimental ethnographic encounters, such obviousness is not reflected by the actual state of the art in research. This becomes particularly evident when it comes to fields and practices predominantly associated with the Anthropocene and the ongoing ecological crisis. Ways of approaching the primary sector are rather dichotomous. Along with NGOs, art collectives and activists, counter-hegemonic market actors and initiatives may well be considered potential political and intellectual partners (cf. Sarmiento 2017). In ethnographic-anthropological inquiries into the core of capitalism and so-called harm industries, on the other hand, scholars tend to even avoid entering an ‘old-school’ kind of collaboration that positions field practitioners as their informants. In fact, most studies on such fields “do not involve ethnographic placement within the corporation” (Benson & Kirsch 2010: 464) but rather concentrate on a “textual analysis of corporations, including critical readings of advertisements and marketing campaigns” (ibid.).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Marina Welker’s (2014) and Hannah Appel’s (2019a) work are the most prominent exceptions that provide stunning analytical insights.

There are many reasons for ethnographers to abstain from viewing mainstream market actors as epistemic partners of any sort. Comprehensive access to a field of activity that is secretive by nature is obviously difficult, and often either denied or limited in fear of negative publicity and market competitors. After all, ethnographic fieldwork is nothing like individual expert interviews or meticulously prepared transparency initiatives – its course and outcomes cannot be fully predicted or controlled by executives and hence arouses their suspicion. Moreover, profit-oriented organizations tend to pose a demand for immediately tangible practical or even commercial benefits of intellectual encounters (Liburkina 2021). Hence, epistemic collaborations with business enterprises are hitherto mainly relinquished to the domain of corporate ethnography. However, such an embedded form of research poses a high risk of epistemic differences harmonizing. Divergent concerns and stances are likely to be smoothed out before becoming relevant for ethnographic analysis (Suchman 2013).

Harmonization is calamitous for any ethnographic endeavor that aims to address the ecological crisis at those very field sites that essentially contribute to the acceleration of its intensity and speed. After all, such encounters are not meant to enact advocacy or a priori shared objectives. Instead, it is the kind of ‘creative interventions’ that are supposed to seek to “engineer [...] a subject with a will to know, differently” (Fortun 2012: 459). As such, they are crucial for realizing the overarching goal of upsetting the established mode of ordering human-environment relations. Ultimately, inducing change does not only imply empowering those who already promote it. It also requires the possibility of addressing those, whose practices and strategies suspend, defy or prevent it.

Against this background, the fundamental guiding question for ethnographic collaboration – “knowledge *for whom?*” – should be accompanied by another more controversial and tricky one. It is hardly disputable that ethnographic encounters initiated to address the chasms of the Anthropocene should benefit ecologies of life in general, not specific profit-oriented actors. What is far less straightforward is *with whom* we should engage in order to generate knowledge that can help achieve that ambitious goal. Most ethnographers working on ‘anthropocenic’ matters collaboratively focus on market actors and fields that are situated beyond or in opposition to hegemonic agendas. As a notable exception, Paul Gilbert (2015) made and then resentfully reflected upon a rare and discomfiting attempt to collaborate with representatives of the mining market elite. Meanwhile, I argue that experimental ethnographic projects also need to design encounters beyond the dichotomy of the “virtuously subversive” (Marcus 2000: 8, cited in Gilbert 2015) and those who “operate within centres and seek knowledge about other places” (Everts 2016: 60). In view of the tenacity of the “Capitalocene” (Moore 2016), it seems particularly worthwhile to engage with types of economic actors whose doings should be considered neither heroic and revolutionary nor scandalous and outrageous.

‘Business as usual’ may at first come across either as a boring or as a dangerous place to look for intellectual partners. Rather than crafting ideas and truth claims, it mainly reproduces those that are already in place. Addressing it might seem to only fit the purposes of those of us on whose imaginations capitalist hegemony has put its claim (Appel 2019b: 32) – those who dare not envision and demand radical transformations. Moreover, critical interventions might be re-appropriated for further immunizing today’s plastic “soft capitalism” against critique (cf. Thrift 1997; Boltanski & Chiapello 2005). The approach to ‘business as usual’ that is put up for discussion on the following pages acknowledges and addresses these concerns. To make a case, I will shed a slightly unusual light on the much-discussed intersection of economic activity and knowledge practices. I shall claim that we need to give it

more analytical credit by consistently viewing firms and companies in the food industry as elements of *more-than-business* networks rather than as distinct entities. What follows from this claim for experimental ethnographic encounters is the possibility to craft interventions that may overcome the aforementioned limitations of collaborations with individual business organizations. As they are envisaged to include sites of knowledge production, such encounters would not be exclusively defined by market logics, poor imaginative capacities and the risk of harmonization. Instead, ethnographers would find themselves productively irritating truth claims right where they unfold their full world-making potential – in the flow of everyday practice. Hence, such interventions would not merely aim at irritating practitioners in individual firms, but interfere in the locus of enacting market realities more generally. As such, they would be situated and potentially far-reaching at the same time.

## Acknowledging Business as More-than-Business

I first came to think of the interconnections of knowledge and business practices as bearing potential for collaborative ethnographic work during my fieldwork amid two strikingly different agri-food production and trade networks. In 2017, I conducted 13 weeks of participant observation in an eco-localist alternative food network (AFN) in Germany, which is certified organic by the EU and an NGO; its members are committed to strict fair-trade regulations and various environmental standards. The second agri-food network was the national export- and growth-oriented Uruguayan rice sector, where I conducted 21 semi-structured interviews and non-participant observations for four weeks in 2017 and two weeks in 2018. Nearly all of the long-grain rice produced on irrigated fields in Uruguay is sold to the country's five largest rice milling enterprises, which process the grains and export them – mostly via international brokers or traders – to more than 60 countries worldwide. The German AFN rejects the logic of the prevalent food regime, whereas the Uruguayan rice sector clearly reproduces it.

Navigating through the two contrasting but similarly prosaic, non-scandalous networks made me acknowledge and scrutinize the crucial role of intertwinements between for-profit activities and knowledge practices. Despite being strikingly different, both sites of food production and trade were shaped by and organized around such business-knowledge entanglements. Food sector practitioners in both the German AFN and the Uruguayan rice sector met professional economists and agricultural scientists on a daily basis. Their encounters were comprised of flows of data, information and nutritional materials; joint events and conferences; shared office space; personal friendships and systematic political support; daily calls and meetings; joint publications and project proposals. Moreover, those relationships were characterized by a fundamental kind of mutual dependence: The experts gathering around the agri-food networks needed the latter as the obligatory subject of their knowledge work. Vice versa, farmers and food industry practitioners needed to be involved in processes of knowledge transfer to organize and assess their operations. Thus, knowledges on agri-food production and trade on the one hand, and agri-food networks as actual enactments of such knowledges on the other, exist for each other “in the strong sense of the coconstruction of identity” (Stengers 2010: 38). Business in the food sector never stands alone. It is given form as such in networks of *more-than-business* relations that inextricably interconnect profit-oriented activities and knowledge production.

Not least because of this continuity of assessing, informing, evaluating, advising and implementing, the interconnections of economic activity and knowledge practices are an essential passage point for reflexivity on the part of food sector practitioners. It was in and through those interconnections that farmers' and managers' activities in both networks were contextualized and mirrored against the background of value arguments, political rationales, sociotechnical imaginations and representations of food systems. In the context of Uruguayan rice production, maximizing efficiency and consistently prioritizing crop yield over all other concerns was known as a form of caring for and about the national economy. The quality parameters of rice varieties and the flows of money from the rice sector to other parts of the local economy were continuously assessed and valued in terms of their impact on the country's economic well-being. An economist working for an agricultural research institute summarized some of the results of such analytical work:

“For each ton of equivalent paddy rice [...], from these 79, almost 80 dollars per ton that is profit, about a little bit less than 60 goes to the society. Only 21 are kept by the sector. This shows the very importance of the chain in terms of supporting the rest of the economy.” (Interview, 10.10.2017)

For the actors involved in producing, selling and studying rice in Uruguay, being continuously presented with such findings resulted in a particular way of making sense of the sector's role and impact. Rice sector practitioners came to reflect upon what they did as responsible in ethical and political terms. They were recognized and recognized themselves as subjects of responsibility and their economic activities as indispensable for the distributive capacity of the national economy. In various interviews and informal conversations, they would often draw on my interviewees' and other experts' work and elaborate on how the cattle industry, shipping sector, subsidy scheme for public transportation and road infrastructure all depended on their work. From a critical outsider's perspective, such a moral economy can clearly be acknowledged as grounded in the power of the modernist notion of the national economy (cf. Murphy 2017) and as an instantiation of the neoliberal program of development promotion. It is still important to note, however, that subject positions and reflexivities in the food sector were given form in and through the imbrication of business and knowledge practices.

This was also the case in the German AFN, even though the resulting subject positions and reflexivities themselves were radically different. There, striving for efficiency was explicitly meant to be backgrounded in favor of embodied engagements with the well-being of intimate others: trade partners, farm workers, farm animals, soil ecologies and bees. In relations to knowledge practices, these highly situated and bounded instances of caring for particular co-existents could be acknowledged and assessed as an overarching responsibility for resisting the hegemonic food regime and its dreadful dynamics. In emphasizing their responsibility for promoting radical change, AFN practitioners often referred to alternative economic models and to a “regional economic cycle” they were supporting. The latter was a conceptual model linking sustainability to rural development that was mobilized in publications of various organizations that collaborated with the AFN, as well as in the literature revolving around the notion of “post-growth” (e.g., in Paech 2008).

On the whole, my empirical material suggests that business and knowledge practices in the food sector are inseparably intertwined. Moreover, it implies that their interconnections are the locus of reflexivities: rather than in the commercial enterprises or in the mind-sets of

their executives, reflexive capacities assume form in an ongoing series of physical and synthetic encounters between business and knowledge practitioners. In and through such encounters with agronomic and economic expertise, food sector practitioners make sense of their activities against the background of particular politics and ethics. Both of these insights have already been acknowledged and put to work for experimental ethnographic collaborations with alternative economic actors (cf. Snyder & St. Martin 2015). What I suggest here is that we could also harness them for designing interventions in hegemonic contexts.

## **Intervening in and with Hegemonic Knowledge-Economy Interconnections: An Agenda**

As I argued above, experimental interventions in hegemonic sites of the market economy are crucial for coping with the situation of the Anthropocene – a situation that connects multiple incommensurable worlds and presents itself as an existential dead-end generated by capitalism (Zigon 2018). I also elaborated on the reasons why such endeavors are unlikely to be aspired, initiated and realized on the part of ethnographers situated in academia. Then, I took a detour to introduce a view of economic activities in the food sector as comprised of interconnections of business and knowledge practices.

In assuming that sites of knowledge production and business are inevitably entangled, we no longer need to think of collaborations with market actors as unfolding in dyadic relationships between researchers and firms. Rather, they can and should include actors who inform, assess and contextualize the activities of those firms. Such a triadic constellation widens the scope of potential ethnographic interventions. Instead of addressing individual sites of mundane profit-making, they would tinker with relations that constitute the backbone of today's market economy. Engaging with them in experimental ethnographic formats would go far beyond reformist interventions in just another corporate strategy. As the rest of the article argues, it may be an attempt to irritate the very truth claims and value arguments that widely sustain the status of the current order of the economy as the only one imaginable.

Moreover, a triadic collaboration actually seems more feasible than a dyadic one in addressing the private sector. Cooperating with market actors is hitherto mainly the business of corporate ethnographers, whereas academically situated researchers do not have the means to mitigate the severe epistemic threats posed by the rationale of usefulness and harmonization. Meanwhile, there is an impressive track record when it comes to ethnographic encounters between social scientists and knowledge practitioners of all kinds. The body of ethnographic work conducted in Science and Technology Studies (STS) provides concepts and methodological tools required for collaborating with experts and applied researchers as epistemic counterparts. The specific difficulty in designing encounters that are meant to irritate the dynamics that undergird and sustain the disaster of the Anthropocene lies in the need to strike the proper balance between openness and critique. How can we engage with knowledge practices that legitimize and enact the patterns of activities we consider harmful, without either losing sight of the bigger picture or merely translating the process into a pre-configured scheme of judgements?

Drawing on his work in the field of genomics, Mike Fortun (2005: 170) pleads ethnographers to commit to an "ethics of promising" (as opposed to an "ethics of suspicion"):

“An ethics of promising for us means being reluctant to judge too quickly, preferring instead to construct new assemblages in which experimental practitioners [...] can ‘muddle through’ together toward mutual understanding and even practical ends.”

The concerns raised by the epistemic power of agronomy and orthodox economics are certainly different from those associated with the field of life sciences. Nevertheless, Fortun’s emphasis on the need “to construct new assemblages” rather than deconstruct the old makes his idea of an “ethics of promising” interesting for reconsidering encounters with the food sector as well. Moreover, his notion of “muddling through” qualifies as a credo for addressing the challenges entailed by this type of collaboration. Critical ethnographers of the Anthropocene on the one hand, and managers, chemical farmers, industrial engineers, agricultural advisors and applied economists on the other, are unlikely to ever agree on all aspects of defining sustainability and envisioning change. If the goal is to tinker with reflexivities so that they might give rise to a will to know the present situation and future trajectories of food systems differently, such unlikely encounters *must* embrace friction as their precondition and permanent feature. After all, acknowledging and coming to terms with disagreement and incompatibility is crucial for “the ideological recognition of epistemic contingency” (Boyer 2015: 99).

But what is it that should come to light as contingent in the course of collaborative encounters between ethnographers and more-than-business networks? Drawing on my own study as well as on Christopher Henke’s (2008) insights into the work of farm advisors in industrialized agriculture, I see three dimensions that need addressing when it comes to efforts invested in questioning and experimentally reconfiguring the rigid patterns of the prevalent food regime:

First, experimental encounters designed to foster the “will to know differently” should explicitly foreground and denaturalize *the embeddedness of localized knowledge practices in agronomy and economics in overarching knowledge regimes*. Critical analysis of hegemonic knowledge tends to view applied research, local advisors and practices of implementing national research strategies as instances of broader discursive forms. We might put this view to work for purposes of irritation, and allow our epistemic counterparts to challenge it. Carefully broaching the issue of assuming their work is meant to introduce and bring to life a rationale that they can hardly ever adjust, might prompt knowledge practitioners to come up with counterexamples. Moreover, it might initiate reflections on how the existing “ecologies of power” (ibid.) are calibrated in their fields of knowledge production, and how they could be re-calibrated. For instance, the Uruguayan economist from an agricultural research institute quoted in the previous section had much to share on his professional experiences with several different local stakeholders and political institutions, and on the tensions involved in such interactions. In addition, he talked about participating in an international group dedicated to developing national agricultural transformation pathways, and ways of interrelating abstract research objectives and local political agendas (Interview, 10.10.2017). Such reflections reveal the inconsistencies, conflicts and ambivalences that are inherent in allegedly predictable “ecologies of power.” They can help us further “understand the ways that local interactions are connected with institutional structures” (Henke 2008: 6). Engaging with them and learning from them is indispensable for resisting the perilous analytical temptation to view and represent the current order of the economy as inevitable. Once tangible and problematized, the relation between centers and peripheries of epistemic power could



be contested in experimental formats. Applied economists, e.g., my interlocutor from Uruguay, might be enrolled in participatory processes of developing research formats and tools that do not aim to harmonize diverse expectations but explicitly address conflicting concerns.

Apart from that, collaborations with more-than-business networks should seek to further explore and use *the potentialities of the relation between knowledge and business practices*. Consultants and applied researchers sustain enterprises in the food sector by evaluating what they do and providing access to the specific information and technologies needed to optimize it. Henke (2008) uses the notion of repair to depict the maintenance dimension of this work. He also suggests that the highly localized expertise that is mobilized in its course does not induce transformative change (ibid.: 179). By the same token, Henke's and my insights also make clear that the interface between knowledge and business practices is all but trivial and unidimensional. Therefore, admitting its lack of revolutionary potential should not prevent us from thinking about the spectrum of its potentialities beyond mere perpetuation. Ethnographers who engage with a more-than-business network over a long time are well positioned to develop collaborative "fieldwork devices" (Sánchez Criado & Estalella 2018) that may invoke and trigger dynamics other than those of maintenance. Those devices could be new formats of joint activities, knowledge exchange or even argument and objection. A field study conducted by Uruguayan agronomists and economists in close collaboration with rice farmers is a good example of a possible entry point for such formats. The researchers themselves mainly used the project to collect detailed information on the variety of agricultural practices and their yield-related effects (Field notes, 10.11.2017; 03.02.2018). However, such occasions of intense exchange could thinkably be harnessed for epistemic work dedicated to joint reflections on political and economic challenges, conflicts and visions. Such experimental encounters, in turn, may figure as disruptive reminders of the fact that knowledge practices can interfere with business practices in non-linear and unpredictable ways, and vice versa.

Finally, experimental ethnographic work with the private sector could establish partial and temporary instances of peace amid the *multiplicity of inevitably conflicting truth claims and value arguments*. Ethnographers may act as diplomats and bring together more-than-business networks that enact irreconcilable ways of knowing the economy. Isabelle Stengers (2005) introduces the notion of diplomacy to elude the idea of negotiation and convergence. The Belgian philosopher of science emphasizes that practitioners' attachments and obligations "are not free to forget or reformulate at will" (ibid.: 193). Diplomatic practice acknowledges that and aims at "slowing down of all the good reasons everybody has to wage a justified war" (ibid.). My insights into two different worlds of agri-food production suggest that business and knowledge practitioners alike are well aware of practices and imaginations that contradict and contest their own. Rice sector practitioners in Uruguay knew that their activities were contested by critics of agricultural intensification and the hegemonic food regime, while AFN practitioners knew that the noble aims of their initiative would be considered illusory from the food industry's perspective. Here, the main task of diplomatic work is not to identify overlaps or promote compatibility – that would be truly futile. Rather, diplomacy implies detaching inevitable attachments from the need to discredit others. Setting up a joint consortium on specific questions, a field-based experiment or a research proposal are all formats that could possibly facilitate that. Such projects would force efficiency- and market-oriented food industry practitioners to take seriously and become more familiar with the

kinds of concerns and knowledges that avoid and compensate for the externalities and failures of the predominant food regime. Ethnographers with a track record in studying knowledge production are best qualified to do the actual diplomatic work that is required for turning “a contradiction (either/or) [...] into a contrast (and, and)” (ibid.).

Tackling these three dimensions would be a profoundly critical intervention. It is grounded in disconcertment and disagreement with the premises and dynamics that sustain conventional food systems. At the same time, it would force ethnographers to go beyond the “politics of judging” that are “both productive of and dependent on an aesthetic of oppositional sobriety” (Fortun 2005: 160). Rather than pointing at failures from an outsider’s vantage point, they would delve right into the mess of divergent, at times discomfiting attachments. Figuring out what new assemblages could be constructed despite those old, inevitable attachments, is an important intermediate step for Anthropocene ethnographers who hope for radical change. While hoping and envisaging, we do not necessarily need to wait and keep safe critical distance from the present situation. Rather, we can choose to promote change at sites that do not deserve sympathy and yet need to be addressed.

## Conclusion

Most recently, the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has uncovered the flaws of contemporary food systems acutely and ubiquitously. The zoonosis itself, the omnipresent scandalous disease outbreaks in the meat industry and wasted harvests are indicative of the highly degrading mode of ordering human-environment relations that marks the Anthropocene. The current crisis has emphasized the need for radical change more than ever. However, while we urge for a revolution, things continue going terribly wrong. More precisely, they go wrong amid the quotidian hegemonic relations that mostly escape the reach of our epistemic interventions.

Based on this general insight, I plea for broadening the scope of such experimental ethnographic work to include ‘business as usual.’ The pitfalls that usually accompany such encounters often prevent us from pursuing them. Taking these constraints seriously, I propose reconsidering the understanding of collaborations with business actors and organizations as dyadic. At least in the food sector, market activities are inseparably connected to knowledge production practices. Re-imagining business actors and organizations as elements of more-than-business networks rather than as distinct entities allows ethnographers to approach the former through ‘the back door.’ Thus, we no longer need to exclusively communicate with the CEOs but may also set up triadic encounters with epistemic partners whose work realities are way more familiar to our analytical lens: knowledge practitioners.

Considering experts and research institutions as entry points for experimental work with the private sector opens up a new range of possibilities for such interventions. In this paper, I briefly outline three dimensions to be tackled: relations between localized knowledge practices and overarching discursive forms, relations between knowledge and business practices, and relations among conflicting truth claims and value arguments. Addressing these dimensions allows us to combine the urge to contest hegemonic forms that keep capitalism in place with a commitment toward “muddling through” their thicket to curate reflexivities.

Such a commitment does not free us from the need to reference the good old question of “knowledge for whom.” The conceptual model of a soft, plastic capitalism that lives and flourishes off knowledge practices has proven to be accurate and valid. Any kind of knowledge fed into arrangements that make up today’s market economy is always at risk of

being parasitically re-appropriated. Nevertheless, the ongoing, ever-intensifying ecological crisis prompts us to take the risk and introduce new means of intervention into commonplace arrangements of the market economy – means that go beyond “oppositional sobriety.” Thus, I propose a less prominent question for collaborative ethnographic work: knowledge *with* whom?

The Anthropocene forces us to reimagine the canon of our epistemic practices and consider unpleasant encounters. This paper suggests how to instigate such collaborative endeavors without compromising a critical stance. It may not make any promises on the success of such an undertaking, but it is grounded on the promise inherent in recent reflections on experimental modes of ethnographic research (cf. Holmes & Marcus 2008; Westbrook 2008; Fortun 2012; Niewöhner 2016; Estalella & Sánchez Criado 2018; Bogusz 2018; Bieler et al. 2021). This body of work gives reason to assume that we might be well prepared for finding the right “fieldwork devices” to actively alter some of the certainties and stabilities that we are trained to observe and analytically dismantle.

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