

Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing

The Mushroom at the End of the World. On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2015, pp. 331

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Can a mushroom become our guide to explore the “dark wood” of the current global capitalism, the “savage, dense and harsh” wood in which, paraphrasing Dante, we seem to have lost “the straightway”? This is the journey that anthropologist Anna Tsing invites us to engage in: the journey of the matsutake mushroom (*Tricholoma matsutake*), from gift to commodity and back. This journey brings us from “disturbed” forestry landscapes that, in such disparate places as the US state of Oregon, the Chinese province of Yunnan, Finland and Japan, result from “the overlapping world-making activities of many agents, human and not human” to the realm of disembedded market commodities in which the mushroom shortly, but decisively, dwells before its transformation into what is considered in Japan as a highly appreciated gift.

With this book Tsing pursues the programme of ethnography of “global connections” she began in the 1990s, with her work on predatory business and local struggles around Indonesian tropical rainforests. That work already focused on the study of “frictions”, meaning the potentially empowering but also compromising effects of “encounters across differences”. Now Tsing observes these frictions in the encounters of value regimes across the Matsutake mushroom global supply chain. Along the way, Tsing develops an original analysis of the value regime of our current capitalist economy that rests on three key-concepts: *scalability* (and its contrary, *nonscalability*), *salvage accumulation* and *global supply chain*. According to the author, scalability means “the ability of a project to change scales smoothly without any change in project frames. A scalable business, for example, does not change its organization as it expands. This is possible only if business relations are not transformative, changing the business as new relations are added” (38). Modernity and capitalism, according to Tsing, are filled up with dreams (and nightmares) of scalability that shape progress in the form of expansion. Scalable projects (be them social, economic or political) are oblivious to the diversity of contexts and the indeterminacies that originate from the encounter with this diversity. Nonscalability, on the contrary, refers to everything that is without that feature, “whether good or bad”. In fact “nonscalability is by no means better than scalability (...). Feudal service was a nonscalable form of labor but not commendable because of it. (...) At the same time, ecological complexity is nonscalable, and so is love; and we value these things”. According to Tsing we need a theory of the nonscalable, intend-

ed as an analytical frame designed so to notice nonscalable phenomena, because only through noticing the nonscalable it is possible to recognize “salvage accumulation”. Salvage accumulation is the feature of capitalism consisting in “taking advantage of value produced without capitalist control” (63) or, more precisely, the ability to create capitalist value from nonscalable value regimes. Salvage accumulation operates through global supply chains that have become the dominant form of organization of commodity production in today world capitalism: “Supply chains are commodity chains that translate value to the benefit of dominant firms; translation between noncapitalist and capitalist value systems is what they do” (63). Wal-Mart is a good example of how a supply chain works. Retail expansion does not require that production be scalable: “Production is left to the riotous diversity of nonscalability, with its relationally particular dreams and schemes. We know this best in ‘the race to the bottom’: the role of global supply chains in promoting coerced labour, dangerous sweatshops, poisonous substitute ingredients, and irresponsible environmental gouging and dumping” (64). As explained by Tsing: “in this ‘salvage’ capitalism, supply chains organize the translation process in which wildly diverse forms of work and nature are made commensurate –for capital” (43).

In this respect, Tsing’s analysis should be of interest to the community of sociologists and other social scientists working on issues of value and valuation. Shifting the analytical focus from the variety of technical devices of “qualculation” to the irreducibly contextual value regimes that emerge in livelihood processes, Tsing stresses the importance of paying attention to the nonscalable modes of valuation that innervate livelihood practices.

“Noncapitalist value systems” are defined by Tsing as “gift economies”: not much more is said in the book about the specific modes of valuation that organize these evaluative spaces, beyond the fact that they are nonscalable, i.e. they cannot be scaled without changing the framework of knowledge or action. Still, Tsing’s contribution to the debate on valuation and evaluation is important in that it points to the relevance, both in research and in politics, of *noticing* the nonscalable value regimes embedded in life processes.

Somehow, Tsing’s idea of “salvage accumulation” echoes the analysis of the feminist thinker Silvia Federici (2012) and her denunciation of the systematic devaluation of “reproductive work”, the largely unnoticed work that is needed for the maintaining of life processes. For Federici too, the sphere of reproduction (extended to include the reproduction of life in the environment) is a sphere of nonscalable modes of valuation that can be shared through practices of “commoning”. Tsing, for her part, introduces the idea of “latent commons” to point to “entanglements” of human and non-human beings “that might be mobilized in common cause” (135). They are not “exclusive human enclaves” and the opening

of the commons to other beings shifts everything: “Once we include pests and diseases, we can’t hope for harmony” (255).

Tsing’s tone is in fact much less optimistic than Federici’s call for a revolutionary resistance against capitalism, led by women and built on the “commoning” of reproductive work. In line with recent developments in feminist new materialism, Tsing embraces the perspective of a fluid state of reality, of an “earthwide condition of precarity” seen as an opportunity for new possibilities of multispecies coexistence, shaping a “third nature”, that is, “what manages to live despite capitalism” (viii). Her enthusiasm for the perspective of the adventurous “life without the promise of stability”, however, is quite moderate. In fact, “a precarious world is a world without teleology” (20), which means that “progress stopped making sense”, for better or worse. The “end of the world” evoked in the book’s title is the end of the modern world, with its progressive destinies and its oppression, both related to projects of scalability. On the one hand, the author argues, “dreams of progress” have blinded us to the diversity of the many world-making projects, human and non-human, that surround us. Without progress, capitalism has no teleology either, which means that “we need to see what comes together – not just by prefabrication, but also by juxtaposition” (23). According to Tsing, descriptions of capitalism as an all-encompassing global political economy (as, for example, in David Harvey’s or Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s analysis) may be accurate when pointing to the capitalist ambition of generalizable commensuration of all forms of value, but they can also underestimate the interweaving of historical contingencies and the fact that unexpected social forms can still emerge within capitalism.

On the other hand, Tsing acknowledges that “progress gave us the ‘progressive’ political causes with which I grew up. I hardly know how to think about justice without progress” (24). Scalability is a two-faced Janus and Tsing’s book does not provide a solution to its enigma.

The author points to the possibility of “collaborative survival” within environmental disturbance; here it should be stressed that “survival” is not the same as flourishing. There is no optimism in Tsing’s account of the adventures of the matsutake mushroom. But neither is there total despair. Even if she believes speaking of “postcapitalist politics” and economies is premature, she argues that out there are “pericapitalist economic forms” that “can be sites for rethinking the unquestioned authority of capitalism in our lives. At the very least, diversity offers a chance for multiple ways forward – not just one” (65). Still “since no patch is ‘representative’, no group’s struggle taken alone will overturn capitalism. Yet this is not the end of politics” (134). However, the question of how to build equivalence between non-scalable “social demands”, in Ernesto Laclau’s sense (Lacau 2005), remains open.

Should we then really give up on all ideas of progress? As Peter Wagner (2015) suggested, we should at least not renounce the idea of progress

towards “a more adequate interpretation of the world we live in”, by identifying new forms of domination while combatting “the hubristic inclination of considering human beings as actually capable of mastering all aspects of their existence on this earth” (Wagner 2015). In this respect, there is something that, according to Tsing, we, as social scientists, can do for a start: practice the art of noticing in our research. This means “to look around rather than ahead”, to cultivate the vulnerability to unexpected encounters (with entities, objects, disciplines); to pay attention to the margins, with no rush to adhere to a pre-formatted narrative.

References

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Luigi Pellizzoni

Ontological Politics in a Disposable World: The New Mastery of Nature, Farnham, Ashgate, 2015, pp. 259

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Since roughly the 1990s, the “ontological turn” has been one of the most thrilling “turns” within social sciences. It has been a breath of fresh air beyond the limits and impasses of either constructionism and positivism. However, its thrill stems also from the controversies it raised, as STS scholars know (see, for instance, the debate in a recent issue of *Social Studies of Science*, 3/45 of 2015, spurred by a previous issue of *SSS*, 3/43 of 2013, dedicated to the issue).

Luigi Pellizzoni, in his book, brings such turn under deep scrutiny. Is it really the case, he asks, that the ontological turn has emancipatory implications? Can the conflation of the epistemological under the ontological liberate humans and non-humans from a dominative, hierarchical and exploitative logic which is based on dichotomies (of nature/culture, thing/thought etc.)? His answer is substantially negative. Pellizzoni, indeed, argues that the ontological turn is paradoxically nourishing neoliberal