



The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins

Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing. 2015. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ. Xii + 331 pp. \$29.95 (cloth). ISBN: 978-0-6911-6275-1 (cloth), 978-1-4008-7354-8 (eBook).

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Received: October 25, 2015

Published: December 19, 2015

Volume: 6(1):214-215

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This long-awaited book concerns the worldwide trade in the mushroom *Tricholoma matsutake* and its American counterpart *T. magnivelare*, a gourmet item of enormous prestige in Japan. There, it has become one of those status-marker foods, like caviar and fine wine—appropriate for high-end gifts and other social prestations. Its popularity is spreading, by status emulation, to other lands. It currently sells for around \$50 a pound in markets.

It proves refractory to cultivation, so is gathered by local rural people in Japan and China. In the United States, it is gathered by recent Asian immigrants (often refugees from the Indochina wars), Latin American migrants, and such Anglo-Americans as have returned to the wild to make a living—many of them Vietnam veterans who cannot cope with urban society, or, for some of them, with any society. They all find comfort and solace in the wild. Most of the gathering is done in Oregon, where incredibly irresponsible logging and forest management led to replacement of commercial timber by weedy lodgepole pine (*Pinus contorta*)—almost useless for wood, but the perfect plant for matsutakes, which are mycorrhizal symbionts of pine roots. In Japan, similar mismanagement had the same effect—but now the forests are more valued for the mushrooms than for any possible timber, and there is a huge effort to restore them. In Yunnan, similar stories have played out, now extending to a stage of total deforestation.

The book moves rapidly from continent to continent, providing a series of superbly done vignettes that touch on all aspects of the industry. There are few statistics or detailed studies, but those seeking for such can find them in technical articles by

Tsing and others in her matsutake working group, such as Michael Hathaway.

Among the ruins of past enterprise, especially in Oregon, people find amazingly creative ways to live and flourish—sometimes in spite of their own internal demons as well as landscape ruination. Tsing's book is hopeful; perhaps we can create new "assemblages" of people, plants, wealth, and other links, and somehow manage the future. In the meantime, however, pickers live precarious lives. Tsing makes good use of the recent concepts of "precarity" (or precariousness) and the "precariate." For once, these are neologisms that actually mean something and describe a serious world problem, and Tsing's cool ethnography of the pickers is a major contribution to understanding it. Perhaps less happy is the coinage of "salvage capitalism" for what has always before been called "primary production": drawing down nature's bounty, in this case timber and mushrooms.

Tsing is a fine writer and a superb ethnographer. She has a brilliant ability to find amazing people, get their stories, and write those stories in a compelling way. She also has an original mind given to quirky insights, as her fascination with life among ruins shows. Also, she has a solid grasp of the biological science involved in the matsutake world, and is insightful and precise at identifying key points and explaining them. In this she differs radically from too many political ecologists and critical-studies environmental writers, who take a perverse pride in not knowing the (colonialist hegemonic master-narrative) science. Her observations on the problems of matsutake taxonomics would be valuable reading for any taxonomist. She also refrains from the harsh,



overheated rhetoric of so much environmental literature. Those who know Anna Tsing find her an extremely decent human being, and she stays very far indeed from the attacks so common in this brand of writing.

Still, some things done in the past are so evil that Tsing cannot gloss them over, notably the complete freedom that timber companies had in Oregon to cut everything down. Thanks to the Forest Service cooperatively assuming the costs of road building, cleanup, security, and replanting, the companies had no incentive to manage the resource or log it sustainably. They followed a “cut and git” rule. Worse still was the rip-off of the Klamath Reservation (pp. 197–199). Local banking and timber interests lobbied with the Eisenhower administration of the US to “terminate” the Klamath Reservation. This was done, and sharp dealers quickly stripped the Klamath and Modoc of their resources, leaving them ruined (see Stern 1966 for the full story; some land was eventually restored, but the timber was gone).

The book is not without problems. Tsing is more original and dashing than careful with theory or history. Right at the start, on p. vii, she gives us a view of “Western philosophy” holding that “Nature...is grand and universal but also passive and mechanical. Nature was a backdrop and resource for the moral intentionality of Man, which could tame and master Nature.” Well, yes, for Descartes and a few others, but not for Kant, Emerson, Thoreau, and countless other thinkers. Later on the page: “The time has come for new ways of telling true stories beyond civilizational first principles” (meaning the above principles of ripping off Nature in the name of Progress). Well, since Kant, Wordsworth, and Thoreau, and on down through Burroughs, Muir, Boas, Leopold and others, to Bill McKibben and Gary Snyder, there have been plenty of people doing that. I have done my small bit. It is somewhat annoying to find all of us consigned to oblivion in a casual sentence.

Later, Tsing blames or credits “capitalism” with the ruin she describes, but the US National Forests, the Japanese communal forests (left from Tokugawa forest policy), and of course China's forests are all the result of socialism in its purest form. Even the private logging firms in Oregon were so heavily subsidized by the US that they were parastatals rather than free

enterprises. The public forests were not even run for profit, theoretically, but for national welfare, though this gave way in all cases to profiteering. So, are capitalism and socialism different? Do they even exist today? Or do we live in a post-capitalist, post-socialist world where state firms and parastatal international corporations control everything?

On a less arcane note, Tsing credits Matthew Perry and US policy for the Meiji Restoration and the revolutionary changes in Japan in the 1860s; this is surely crediting the US too much. There were plenty of internal struggles that were poised to do the job. There are a few other bits of controversial history in the book, including a tendency to ignore Tokugawa forest policy and its green legacy. The problems with history and with developing a clear message about capitalism and its trajectory tend to weaken this book as a source of theory.

The final message is one of hope. We can, indeed, find and create “life in capitalist ruins.” We will certainly need to; the age of free goods from nature is over, and every appropriation (be it primary production or salvage capitalism) now comes at someone's expense. One has an uncomfortable feeling that the future will be more like the Klamath Tribe termination than like the free life in the forest of the matsutake pickers. Moreover, one has an even more uncomfortable feeling that the future will consist of an ever more complete fusion of governments and international corporations. This is appearing most clearly in China, where classic European fascism—fusion of a totalitarian, autocratic state with giant industrial enterprise, justified by oppression of minorities and other groups—is now in place and getting rapidly more extreme.

In short, this is an important book that should start, not end, discussion. Meanwhile, the hills around me are rich with *Tricholomas* after late-summer rains, and I can't find out what they are. Some trichs are gourmet fare, like the matsutake; others are poisonous. I hope mine are the new matsutake!

References Cited

- Stern, T. 1966. *The Klamath Tribe: A People and Their Reservation*. University of Washington Press, Seattle, WA.