

# As Fragile as a Matsutake

by Clotilde Riotor and Cyprien Tasset

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**Can a mushroom help us understand the changes and deadlocks of capitalism? Studying *matsutake* foraging and commerce, anthropologist Anna Tsing describes a world that has turned its back on progress and where survival depends upon fragile collaborations between humans and the world surrounding them.**

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Reviewed: Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World. On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

## Anthropology of survival in precarious times

Unexpectedly, one of the social science books to have come in for the most attention and discussion recently is an anthropological essay about an aromatic mushroom with an important role in Japanese society. Published in 2015 in English, the book's French translation came out in September 2017, prompting similar swathes of reviews as the original. If the book has been so successful, it is because of how skilfully Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing explores the various facets of her topic, drawing on multi-sited ethnography (United States, China, Japan, Finland, and Canada) to produce innovative reflection about the changing faces of capitalism and the prospects offered by our current time, against a backdrop of precarity and environmental crisis.

The anthropologist first heard about *matsutake* pickers in 1993 from a mycologist colleague just as she was looking for an example of a culturally colourful global

commodity. In medieval Japan, peasants traditionally offered *matsutake* to their lords. In the Edo period, the *matsutake* progressively became a mark of refinement reserved for the elite and a symbol of advent of autumn, celebrated in arts and poetry. However, far from falling by the wayside after the modernisation of the Meiji restoration, its traditional use continued and was even reemphasised. As Japan became firmly embedded in the global economy, the *matsutake* was used as a gift and sometimes even as a bribe to foster or maintain personal links. It was sent from abroad, sold in fine food shops, and served in high-class restaurants. After the 1970s, however, it became rare in Japanese forests leading to a sharp rise in both price and imports.

Furthermore, its biological properties – a preference for coniferous forests with poor or devastated soil – raise another issue: the environmental crisis, of which A. Tsing takes a sombre view. While the ‘end of the world’ in her title could be understood in geographical terms, as referring to the ends of the earth to which the book transports its readers, this essay does frame things in the ‘apocalyptic light’ (p. 274) of the great catastrophes awaiting a world with a climate so disrupted that:

‘it is unclear whether life on earth can continue’ (p. vii).

According to the author, in order to take the measure of this profound upheaval, anthropology must be freed from the notion of progress which it tacitly maintains, even if doing so means that the world becomes a ‘terrifying place’ (p. 282) where we ‘hardly know how to think about justice’ (p. 24-25).

For Anna Tsing, breaking with the promise of progress does not mean that the social sciences should take the opposite stance, namely espousing a narrative of total environmental disaster. It is in this sense that the people busying themselves around this mushroom are relevant: they show that forms of life emerge from the ruins that give us reason not to despair, no matter how fragile and imperfect they might be. *The Mushroom at the End of the World* seeks not so much to prove an argument as to use anthropological inquiry to open up an original avenue of thought framed by two guiding notions: taking seriously the importance of the Anthropocene era<sup>1</sup> and rejecting absolute pessimism.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This term refers to the era in which humanity has become a dangerously decisive geological actor. For the various avenues and debates to which this idea has given rise, see C. Bonneuil and J.-B. Fressoz (2013). Anna Tsing is in conversation with several authors who have addressed this notion: D. Danowski and E. Viveiros de Castro (2014), B. Latour (2017), D. Haraway (2016) and I. Stengers (2015), who wrote the preface to the French translation of her book.

<sup>2</sup> This rejection of complete pessimism converges with the recent book by F. Chateauraynaud and J. Debaez (2017), who credit *The Mushroom* with having inspired their concept of ‘counter-anthropocene’.

## From Marginality to Globalisation: the Trajectory of an Anthropologist of Southeast Asia

This book adds a further dimension to the work of its author, who is Professor of Anthropology at the University of Santa Cruz in California. Until now, Anna Tsing had mainly drawn on ethnographic study of the Dayak in the Meratus Mountains of South Kalimantan in Indonesia. Based on her doctoral thesis, *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen: Marginality in an Out-of-the-way Place* (Tsing, 1993) presented this 'isolated society' in the form of an 'ethnological fiction' (Guerreiro, 1997). In *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Tsing, 2005), which was awarded the American Ethnological Association's Senior Book Prize, A. Tsing described landscapes that, since the 1980s, have been irreversibly damaged by the predation of resources under the pressure of economic interests fostered by developmentalist stances. This book was already written in the vein of the anthropology of globalisation. It earned particular attention due to its analysis of the 'frictions', that is to say tensions but also contingent collaborations between local, governmental, multinational, and environmental actors driven by conflicting interests.

## **Painting the portrait of a fragmented world, one stroke after another**

In *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, A. Tsing proves faithful to her desire, expressed at the beginning of her career, to pursue a 'writing strategy in which curiosity is not overwhelmed by coherence' (Tsing, 1993, p. 33). An overall dynamic is certainly visible in her work.

The first section of the book begins in a 'ruined Oregon industrial forest' (p. 14). The *matsutake* developed here in the twentieth century when the soil became impoverished. A rush for this new 'white gold' (p. 18) began at the end of the 1980s, when the Japanese stopped importing the mushroom from Europe after the areas where it grew were contaminated by the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. Ever since, this landscape, despite resembling something from 'a science fiction nightmare' (p. 14), has been the stage for an annual flurry of activity from a mixed group of foragers – 'disabled white veterans, Asian refugees, Native Americans, and undocumented Latinos' (p. 18). In the evening, back at the camp, the day's harvest is sold to the best

buyer. Thanks to its high price, the *matsutake* provides a considerable – and sometimes main – source of income for the most assiduous foragers.

The second part of the book dispels any impression that this mushroom might be anecdotal, showing how it fits into a world economy reconfigured around ‘global supply chains’.

A. Tsing retraces the way in which, particularly from the 1980s onwards, Japanese industries increasingly used subcontracting to compensate for the rise in the yen encouraged by the United States, in a context of international competition. However, as these ‘global supply chains’ became the main cogs in the wheel of global capitalism, they sounded the death knell for improved conditions for wage earners and for expectations of progress: based on extensive division of the production chain, they ‘allowed lead corporations to let go of their commitment to controlling labor’ (p. 110).

These firms, which became both producers and retailers, no longer had to provide guarantees about their workers’ employment conditions, well-being, or training, nor even prove that they were respecting environmental standards in their wholesalers’ countries.

The mushroom trade therefore proves to be the tip of the iceberg of a ‘salvage capitalism’ that the author considers a prevailing feature of the global economy. Salvage accumulation is the process of producing value from pericapitalist sites, including those that are particularly rich in natural resources, in order to make profits. Although A. Tsing does qualify the notion that the whole world is under the empire of capitalism,<sup>3</sup> her conclusions nevertheless remain relatively pessimistic insofar as the perspectives she offers are not so much about radical change or resisting capitalism than about lifestyles that allow life on its margins.

The rest of the book addresses practices related to *matsutake* in the other fields studied: for example, in China, its cultivation has contributed to reconfiguring social roles against a backdrop of privatisation of forest spaces. The stories of the plants and landscapes in these different forests are sometimes ‘without human heroes’ (p. 155), for example the pine trees that recolonised clearcut zones in the boreal forests in Finnish Lapland. Anna Tsing also broaches the sociology of science in a chapter devoted to different scientific approaches to *matsutake* in Japan – where research takes

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<sup>3</sup> The author explains this point by positioning her stance in relation to the work by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt.

a more monographic form, attentive to local configurations and knowledge – and in the United States – where it is studied as part of forestry research designed to serve scalable management of timber trees. Finally, she shows that this mushroom gives rise to attempts to bring out ‘latent commons’ (p. 135) such as, for example, programmes to revitalise woodland areas in Japan that deliberately disturb the soil according to traditional village customs.

The overall structure of the book is submerged by a branching, entangled form of writing, as though it were organised organically, mimicking the world the author describes, rather than following the constraints of explicit logical demonstration. However, this seeming dispersal, which can be misleading, also reflects one of A. Tsing’s key commitments, which is to the defence of anthropology. The sensitivity of this discipline to details and marginal spaces allows the author to explore the exceptions and discrepancies left aside by metanarratives, whether they focus on progress or collapse.

## Post-progress modes of subsistence

What possibilities for ‘life in capitalist ruins’ does *The Mushroom at the End of the World* foreground? Running counter to ‘popular American fantasies’ in which ‘survival is all about saving oneself by fighting off others’ (p. 27), A. Tsing wants to show that survival is based instead on ‘coordination’ or ‘assemblages’, to use the notion she borrows from Bruno Latour, between different actors, including non-human ones. However, her description of the pickers who, each year, spread out through the Oregon forests, far from the quarrels between industrial foresters and environmentalists, is not irenic. The wars and displacement they have often experienced have given them skills and tastes that make them suited to life in the forest, but have also excluded them from ‘standard’ employment or what remains of it:

There are no wages and no benefits; pickers merely sell the mushrooms they find. Some years there are no mushrooms, and pickers are left with their expenses. (p. 4)

Should these pickers be described as ‘precarious’? This term, which is emblematic of contemporary social critique, is very present in the book but is given shifting meanings.

A. Tsing does use it, in a restricted sense, to describe the situation of the pickers, deprived of stable employment. However, they do not seem to expect much from modern salaried employment and find common ground in the value they give to 'freedom' in its various iterations (anti-communism, anti-statism, autonomy, or even the right to a traditional community life). The economic trends at play, and particularly the current environmental tipping point that has been reached, mean that the guarantees setting stable work apart from precarious work are only relative. Precarity is becoming universal as the 'condition of our time' (p. 20), composed of vulnerability and interdependency,<sup>4</sup> and only leaving room for 'assemblages' of indeterminate length. The notion of precarity takes on exploratory overtones, with the pickers' informal work illustrating a form of 'collaborative survival' (p. 2) that seems destined to spread alongside industrial ruins. Put differently, precarious work is no longer an exception to be normalised but instead, for better or for worse, an experiment in post-progress ways of life.

The final pages of the book raise the question of the conditions of academic research. Anna Tsing, who heavily emphasises the collective side to the research on which she draws, deplores the rampant privatisation threatening universities (p. 285). Much like a forest ecosystem, intellectual life requires open encounters and collaboration. Individual performance in this sphere depends on fragile collective entanglements. While it is important to critique these logics of commodification, it is also important to recognise that the 'ruins' are already clearly present in universities and that academic activism has already taken up the idea of survival within them.<sup>5</sup> In this regard, as in many others, *The Mushroom at the End of the World* provides suggestive insight into a particularly topical issue.

### Further reading:

- Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *L'Événement anthropocène* (Paris: Seuil, 2013).
- Laura Centemeri, 'Review of Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World. On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*', *Tecnoscienza. Italian Journal of Science & Technology Studies* 8, n°1 (2017): 159-162.

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<sup>4</sup> This is close to the 'precariousness' conceptualised by I. Lorey (2015) drawing on J. Butler.

<sup>5</sup> *Out of the Ruins: The Emergence of Radical Informal Learning Spaces*: [https://secure.pmpress.org/index.php?l=product\\_detail&p=815](https://secure.pmpress.org/index.php?l=product_detail&p=815); 'De la ZAD à l'Université': <https://sse.hypotheses.org/140>

- Francis Chateauraynaud and Josquin Debaz, *Aux bords de l'irréversible* (Paris: Pétra, 2017).
- Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, 'L'arrêt de monde', in Émilie Hache (ed.), *De l'univers clos au monde infini* (Dehors, 2014), p. 221-339.
- Antonio J. Guerreiro, 'A. Lowenhaupt Tsing, In the Realm of the Diamond Queen', *L'Homme* 37, n° 142 (1997): 160-164.
- Donna Haraway, 'Staying with the Trouble: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene', in Jason W. Moore (ed.), *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism* (Oakland: PM Press, 2016), p. 34-76.
- Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia. Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime.* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017)
- Isabell Lorey, *State of Insecurity. Government of the Precarious* (London: Verso, 2015).
- Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen: Marginality in an Out-of-the-Way Place* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).
- Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).
- Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).
- Isabelle Stengers, *In Catastrophic Times. Resisting the Coming Barbarism* (Open Humanities Press: 2015).

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