
Book Review

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Magical Realist Sociologies of Belonging and Becoming: The Explorer

by: Rodanthe Tzanelli

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In her new book, which entitles *Magical realist sociologies of belonging and becoming*, R. Tzanelli explores the traditional tenets of Western imaginaries through the tensional intersection between genres and the poetics of mobilities. The concept of ‘edgework’ occupies a central position in explaining high-risk leisure practices (like sports) and risk-aversion. To put simply, risk-takers (edge workers) develop a sense of self-realisation which allows them to survive in the confrontation of risks. The question of whether the figure of risk seems imminent to the social structure (in Beck), edgework (in Lyng’s thinking) signals to a re-signification in the horizons of chaos and order. At a closer look, the concept of social order (in the Hobbesian analogism) comes from a much deeper imperial discourse which is certainly based on a powerful metaphor –if not a dichotomy–; the genealogy of western rationality punctuates as the sweeping renunciation to the egoist (primitive) drives, which are naturally inherited in the human mind, to confer the Leviathan the monopoly of force, ensuring in this way a durable peace. By thinking the dialectics between rationality and irrationality equates to believe that only the civilised European law brings light to the dark tribal mind. Not surprisingly, the same applies to the rejection of traditional sociologists to explore leisure practices which are often considered naïve or superficial. Her position associates to a critical discussion that revolves from aesthetics and technology to postmodern tourism consumption. Readers will see how this argument resonates repeatedly in the chapters that form the present editorial project.

As the previous introduction, she organises the book in four-clear cut readings which are subdivided into two parts each one. In the reading one, Tzanelli gives some hints in a philosophical discussion revolving around the notion of perception. With basis on Stefanos Kontos (a well-known free-diver) and the Underwater Gallery, she questions to what an extent we gaze the landscape before our eyes without destroying its magical aura. In this respect, she coins the term “globular economy of perception” to denote how the emotional aesthetics of consuming is being systematically replicated through tourism and mobilities. The power of imagination fabricates not only specific geographical spaces and belongings where global travelers move but also creates stories which legitimate the perception of the environment (a-la Ingold). The explorer –like the freediver– coexists relationally with the visited landscape, and in so doing his perceptions are simultaneously

direct results of his experience. The separation of knowledge and technology, which started with the enlightenment, evinces a clear split between arts and craft, as Tzanelli explains. Here a paradoxical situation takes place. Any person (like free-divers) keeps his internalised ‘aesthetic frames’ which are originated and conditioned by the culture where he grew, but at the same time, his actions shake the reign of dogmatism which are proper of social belonging.

In the second reading, Tzanelli centers her analysis in *vimeo*’s world, which is a free video platform where users upload, download and exchanges videos of high-quality resolution (or heavier than 500MB). As she puts it, “*the vimeo has such a dynamic power to bond humans as more-than bodies, social beings claiming a sort of aesthetic natality*” (p.67). Returning to Stefanos’ work, but above all to his conception of the darkness, Tzanelli argues that the vimeo exhibits the great contradiction revolving around reality and perception. Sociologists, on one hand, may very well exert a radical critique on the World Wide Web as a mechanism towards depersonalisation and alienation, but on another, it still remains operating as a true way of communication finely ingrained in the societal order (structure). At this point, she steps back into a previous inquiry on the notion of edge-work to denote how the reification process makes but at the same time molds cyclically our cosmologies. While the structure disposes of creating numerous global communities, the tourist system orchestrates on different tourist groups. At any dark spectacle, the finitude (death) of the self is staged as a unique possibility –probably in repeated ways-, but once risk is neutralised, the principle of pleasure finally surfaces. Citing Merleau-Ponty, the section clearly reminds we are in this world moving towards but encapsulated within. The intersection of digital technology with museumification is a point well-treated in reading three. Both figures, following Tzanelli’s argument, museum and tourismification show some commonalities. The fabricated memory (or national heritage) is never dissociated from a genealogy of race, where ethnicities are created, ordered and distributed according to interests of the status quo. Having said this, the Greek civilisation seems to be torn between the ideals of Enlightenment and the civilised lifestyle and the so-called barbarity of the Ottoman Empire. Beyond the ideals of the nationhood, there lie new hybridised forms aimed at unpacking the pastime but scrutinising it through the modern eyes. This is the key factor that legitimates Western colonisation.

The fourth and last reading, rather, focuses on the western representations of indigeneity. What is more important, the idea of the native –or the aborigine- seems far from being fixed or static, it preferably makes emphasis on a staged nature. To some extent, museums represent different – and geographically-located- cultures but covering their biographical backgrounds. Any representation succumbs in the philosophical chasm between the being-in-this world and the act-of-experience the world. Probably, this is the chapter where Ingold is more present, but she does not mention him. Her main thesis held here speaks readers of a western philosophy obsessed to replicate the archetype of Man, likely suppressing his biological nature subordinating his desires to the power of the mind. At this point, the patriarchal order potentiated the urgency of precision while emotions were relegated to a peripheral position as a quintessential feature of the feminine side. The reading condenses an epistemological discussion, which even if ignited by modern anthropology, has not been correctly resolved to date: the anthropological encounter of self and ‘the alterity’.

In a nutshell, tourism –like science- operates in the same dilemmas of the rational observer and the irrational observed, leading the Western epistemology into an

irreversible gridlock: the neglect of the 'Otherness'. At the time we travel more, the world is more unfamiliar to us. As she eloquently says, "*the second consequence of capitalist and postcolonial violence is uncannier and more resurgent. It uses the double reality of native alienation from the Western worlds of reason and native system of thought as a performative narrative vehicle so as to help the visitor/stranger/tourist participate in a Brechtian defamiliarization with the world of native nature/culture*" (p.140).

This structural dualism –above noted- not only helps us to expand our understanding and dichotomies around the problem of ecology and climate change but gives a clear diagnosis on the Western magical imaginary in a digital and hyper-global world. At least for this review, *Magical realist sociologies of belonging and becoming* brings a clear and fresh position to the foreground, scrutinising on the other side of imperialism as well as the impacts of digital technologies in the daily lifestyle. The darkness says much of the mainstream cultural values of society than we certainly imagine. For those readers concerned by politics and mobilities, this book offers a high-quality and elegantly-written text which articulates magisterially different academic position, viewpoints and theories into an all-encompassing diagnosis.