

Response: Unruly Edges

I did not like this essay, but I think it is important. Anna Tsing had a lot to share, and with it, she crafted an exposé of human greed and its historical consequences. I am unsure, however, of what Anna Tsing's extension of 'mushroom' stands to fully represent. What was the intention? Our class discussion pointed out the normativity of her argument, such as the binary & *symbolic* lines drawn between *cereal* and *fungi*, but what is her environmental ethic exactly? Tsing outlines the issues of the human condition and, one may argue, its mistreatment of nature, but she doesn't talk about intrinsic value & importance.

The era of enlightenment shows us that even a subject has intrinsic value, importance, and *les droits*. But what about nature? I seek an environmental ethic that can show us why nature should be respected for its intrinsic value. (That is, not for its utility or superficial beauty). Reading Tsing's essay with this perspective left me with a lot unanswered. I found myself writing, "(this paragraph) sounds so bad, but why is it relevant?" in the margins often. Yes, strict boundaries of domestication and the ensuing consequences are bad and stemmed from cereal agriculture, but who's to say that following a historical path of foraging would be any different? And why exactly would it be different?

I infer Tsing's argument claims that a forage-based society would have limited human over-expansion and -proliferation. Tsing notes, on the issue of hyper-fertility, that humans "wanted as many children as possible not only because of the fetish of fertility but also because the family needed more labor for the cereals." Her argument's implication is that the natural human urge for reproduction is insignificant compared to the 'new' urge for fertility (attributed to the need for labor). However, Tsing does not defend what she is implying. How can one be sure that the human population would have been so self-limited? In Tsing's argument structure, cereal agriculture was a means to state-based land manifestation, and with its end came a dire need for labor (fertility). What if cereal agriculture was a means to population growth (fetish of fertility), and with its end came state-based land manifestation/militarization for the purposes of security?

I agree that a forage-based society presents smaller demands. In fact, transitions to cereal agriculture over foraging brought many issues to civilizations, and calorically was not worth the effort!¹ The benefit, however, of a post-foraging society is that there is space for cultural growth; whereby, farmers can produce food beyond a level of self-sustenance. This change opens social roles that aren't food-based,

¹ Bowles, S, "Cultivation of cereals by the first farmers was not more productive than foraging", 2011, The Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS), <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1010733108>

which means cultural growth is in order! Humans that don't farm have the opportunity for thought, art, and development (scientific). According to the moral theories of philosophers abound, there is intrinsic value in this expansion of culture. The question of relevance then is what were the cultural limitations of a forage-based society?

All in all, Anna Tsing does well to expose and identify issues in society and she successfully attributes those issues to cereal agriculture. Her suggestions, however, do not offer explanations for the intrinsic importance of nature as a reason to stop mistreating it. I guess I am still in search of this.