

Ulaskan Buku/*Book Review*

Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing 2005. *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 321pp. including notes, index, and bibliography.

An oft-noted irony of anti-globalisation activism is the social movement's deep dependence on globalisation. Disparate actors with widely divergent agendas unite under shared slogans common tropes of empowerment, indigeneity, resistance and with the help of transborder communications and resource flows, for moments of cataclysmic protest and routine low-level carping. These specific connections and collaborations may not be terribly deep or meaningful, but the norms they embody and universals they engage are highly significant. Anna Tsing's latest book is about those sorts of intersections: how they happen, how to understand them, what they obscure. Intrigued by the misunderstandings of goals and concepts between sides as well as among supposed collaborators, Tsing finds that it is that very 'friction' that makes progress possible.

As Tsing, a professor of Anthropology at the University of California, Santa Cruz, explains, hers is an 'ethnography of global connection'. While the narrative homes in particularly on Meratus Dayak encounters with rapaciously extractive capitalism, her real interest here is in the 'zones of awkward engagement' between and among communities, corporations, countries, and concerned outsiders. This study is a wide-ranging one, taking us from the forests of South Kalimantan to the board rooms of Canada; from Carl Linnaeus's pioneering science of botany to John Muir's championing of national parks and Indonesian student nature lovers' domestication of adventure tourism; and from the plethora of fungi in a Meratus mountain village to the sordid intrigues of Soeharto's parasitic children. Tsing starts from predatory business practices in the Indonesian periphery and the resistance or resignation with which these are met, then steps back to interrogate how this region came to be styled as a capitalist 'frontier'; how such concepts as 'globalisation', 'development' and 'environment' assumed their meaning; and how our understanding of these encounters is shaped and constrained. At times, the connections here are hard to follow but to some extent, that's the point. The story jumps from place to place because the connections invoked are so far-flung and the genealogy and meaning of purported universals so convoluted and slippery, deriving as they do from contingent chains of interaction across space and time.

Tsing laments the 'gaps' that constrain awareness and action: zones of disinterest, blindness, or illegitimacy that lead us only to perceive places and circumstances in certain ways. For instance, we (and the 'we' in Tsing's account is explicitly a mostly-Northern readership) have great difficulty perceiving and understanding the forest landscape as both natural and social (i.e., shaped in

substantial part by human behaviours); instead, we commonly see these two traits as dichotomous. She argues that what we take to be universals from environmentalism to prosperity are neither politically neutral nor stable, but are hybrid, transient concepts, developed through chains of contingent events and translated for local use in heterogeneous contexts. One way to conceptualize the malleability of concepts and salience of global connections is by tracing activist packages, or allegorical models of images, heroes and villains, stories, songs, and more. For instance, the discourse and activism of global environmentalism nurtured by Chico Mendes in support of Amazonian rainforests (and Brazilian rubber-tappers) in the 1980s fostered a shallow but effective transnational coalition. That set of ideas and actions traveled soon after to the very different context of Sarawak, spearheaded by the Swiss Bruno Manser and Northern NGOs claiming to speak for the Penan. There, global environmental solidarity was reinterpreted by Mahathir as eco-imperialism, thus rendering this activist package unacceptable to Indonesia for the duration of the New Order.

The audience for this book is varied: Indonesianists and Southeast Asianists, of course; environmentalists and other activists; economists interrogating capitalist models; and anthropologists seeking new epistemological angles. While Tsing is a masterful storyteller, interspersing wry, evocative, alternately chilling and warm narrative passages throughout the text, other sections are more obscure and academic; this book may not be for the casual reader, although it would make for a provocative classroom text. One area of inquiry Tsing could explore further is between her exploration and other approaches not just more mainstream ethnographies, which she does invoke, but other ways of understanding activism and interpretation. Most notably, as a student of social movements and especially the 'contentious politics' school, I am struck by the apparent ease of translating Tsing's account into that framework. Though she does not use the language of 'mechanisms', Tsing defines and operationalises a set of them: proliferation, scale-making, generalization, cosmopolitanism, and collaboration. Her discussion of contingency and interpretation, too, evokes political opportunity structures and framing, while the idea of 'activist packages' clearly overlaps with that of repertoires of contention.

Overall, the book accomplishes its aims in brilliant style. Yes, we learn the pedigree and problematics of contemporary environmentalism, deplore the reckless profiteering of the Bre-X mining scandal, and see the transformations the transition to, then from, the New Order has wrought in terms of activist possibilities in Indonesia. More broadly, though, *Friction* makes us wonder what we do not see: what other gaps pervert our understanding of the world, or what other universals do we take for granted without ever grasping the contingencies and possibilities enmeshed within? More encouragingly, we are left with a new sense of activists' agency, not just to organize and mobilise, but to reshape the very terms of the debate as they have, it seems, been doing all

along, and at all levels, places, and spaces. Indeed, this is a book more about thought processes and knowledge production than pat answers and static histories. Tsing wants us to think about social justice in the 21st century: what it means, whose priorities should prevail, and how to pursue it. In this objective, her compelling account cannot help but succeed.

Meredith Weiss, Ph.D.
Fellow
East-West Center, Washington D.C.
USA
weissm@eastwestcenter.org