Literature Review of “The Global Situation,” by Anna Tsing

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“Imagine a creek cutting through a hillside. . . As a creek flows, it makes and remakes its channels,” she explains. “For many years, the creek makes only gradual changes in the landscape. Then a storm sweeps the flux beyond its accustomed boundaries. . . Trees are uprooted, and what was once on the right side is now on the left. So, too, the social world has shifted around us” (Tsing, 327). Anna Tsing uses the imagery of the channels and flow created by a creek to guide the reader through her discussion of the era of globalization. And it is through this imagery that she critiques her fellow anthropologists for their shortsightedness in this new era. Tsing makes an argument that there has been too much focus on what she calls “flow,” the cultural exchanges between cultures and nations, and the “imagined landscape” created by the globalization. Because the focus has been on the flow, anthropologists have overlooked the cultural and political process of “scale making,” where the concepts of “regional” and “global” are defined (Tsing, 330). In her essay, “The Global Situation,” Tsing analyzes anthropology’s visions of globalization, cautioning her fellow anthropologists on the importance of critical distance, identifying the “seductive” nature of globalization, and pointing toward a more guarded approach with which social scientists may address globalization.

Tsing’s use of landscape imagery to describe patterns of globalization comes as no surprise as she has authored and coauthored a cache of works on globalization and the environment. Yet this essay seems to be a response to a host of anthropologists’, and the discipline of anthropology’s, efforts to define what globalization means before the results are fully visible. “We rush into interdisciplinary social theory to find innovative, project-oriented suggestions. In this process, it is easy to endorse frameworks of globalization that transcend the limitations of site-oriented local research” (Tsing, 346). Her solution? “Abandon the search for a single global future” (Tsing, 344).

Tsing effectively uses a three-pronged approach to analyze the relationship of social sciences with globalization. By dividing her discussion in to the draw of futurism, conflations, and circulation, she examines draw of social sciences to globality (the final stage of globalism)
and “globalism” (social support of globality), and how the “charisma” globality is able to move social masses. She explains that it is the concept of “newness” in globalization that seduces social scientists; it is a rare opportunity to offer an analysis of the future (Tsing, 332). Under the lens of conflations, Tsing dissects the coherent vision of globalism, revealing the many projects, ideologies and agendas which have only one thing holding them together: the very concept of globality. She suggests that the study of these differences united under the concept of globalization makes a more interesting and realistic study attainable by the field of social sciences, rather than defining the global future (Tsing, 334). Third, is the concept of circulation, the action in which globality is developed out of interconnection and exchange of all things social (Tsing, 336). Under these three areas Tsing explores social science’s attraction to globalization and it’s weakness for the opportunity to become caught up in the excitement of being present in a rapidly changing era.

Tsing evaluates three authors who have written on future globalisms, Ulf Hannerz, Michael Kearney, and Ajun Appadurai, in order to make her point that social scientists have been seduced by the opportunity to predict the social future, and analyzes how these social scientists’ cart-before-the-horse syndrome has developed three different visions of globality based on their own ethnographic experiences (Tsing, 343). Through her critique of her fellow social scientists, Tsing exposes her own opinion on the vision of the global future, asking: why can’t they all be right? She reveals that she believes strongly that there is a natural sense of heterogeneity and “open-endedness” in the world, and sees these characteristics working within globalization, simply redefining the “aesthetics,” or cultural structures, which societies, economies, geographies and nations states are currently bound to. She promotes the notion that the world is in a continuous state of change, with the flow of social exchanges not only influencing cultural, geographical, and political definition, but restructuring the very core of these concepts. She does not subscribe to the popular dichotomy of “global” and “local” as synonyms for sameness and diversity, but sees a possibility for “global’ diversity” as an option beyond the antiglobalist visions strict territorial boundaries and differences defining social diversity (Tsing, 352). Jumping back to her initial framework of the creek, she
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says, “I am arguing that we can study the landscape of circulation as well as the flow. How are people, cultures, and things remade as they travel?” (Tsing, 346).

Her solutions are clear; anthropologists should stop focusing only on the flow of the cultural, political or economic and also additionally turn their attention to the “ideologies of scale and projects of scale making,” thus expanding their observation beyond the flow and also to the channels (Tsing, 347). Tsing defines the ideologies of scale as cultural conception and perception of locality, regionality, and globality. She suggests that studies of globalization are much more varied than the limited visions of future making established by social scientists. By taking away the role of anthropologist in defining the process of globalization based on their own studies, she suggests that social scientists can avoid endorsing a particular stance on globalization, study developments without jumping to conclusions about their long-lasting global impact, and expand the field’s perception beyond the dichotomy of “global” and “local” (Tsing, 352).

Some publications addressing globalization published after Tsing’s essay show that she is not alone in her thinking. In his essay “The Obscure Objective of Global Health,” Didier Fassin joins Tsing by suggesting opportunities for social scientists to better understand the channels of cultural flow. He feels unsettled about the loose ideology of globalization being attached to concepts as a type of equalizing and accessible promise for health. He argues that there is a combination of events, ideologies and perspectives behind both the term “global” and process of globalization. Fassin emphasizes his point by saying, “globalization is definitely not the monolithic homogenizing process many have denounced, but rather a mélange of uniformity and distinctions, of power and innovations” (Fassin, 108). While the publications Tsing addresses are used as examples of shortsightedness in the social sciences, in her essay “Talking About Culture: Globalization, Human Rights and Anthropology,” Fran Markowitz takes an approach Tsing could approve of. Markowitz looks at how social groups are grappling for cultural definition in the process of globalization, and extends her analysis to include the
historical context of cultural change to more fully explain why people want cultural definition (Markowitz, 331).

Tsing’s essay brings up a reasonable question: since when has the field of anthropology been in the business of predicting the future of social structures and systems? Through her critique she brings the discipline back to the present, away from futuristic speculations based on regional specific observations. She reminds social scientists that subscription to a vision of globality removes them from critical distance required in social sciences. She gently chides those who have been seduced by the rare opportunity to take a shot at depicting the future and reminds her readers that if social sciences are to become another set of projects sucked into the conflation of globalization, then they just might miss the exciting opportunities to observe and record both the flow and reshaping of social channels as they happen.

Works Cited:

