

**Korstanje, M. E. (2017). *The Rise of Thana-Capitalism and Tourism*, London and New York: Routledge. ISBN: 9781138209268**

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Disaster and suffering as spectacles regulate contemporary life in Maximiliano Korstanje's recent book on the relationship between capitalism and the death drive. Obsession with death propels modern individuals to consume spaces of mass murder and destruction, in an endless process of self-affirmation and as an ego-boosting mechanism. This process permeates the logic of contemporary 'culture industries', including those of media (such as film, satellite TV and the internet) and tourism, and oils the capitalist machine's profit-making to the detriment of the poor, the weak and the disenfranchised. These populations are easily positioned as objects of scrutinisation, with 'First-World' and affluent consumers as spectators of the drama of poverty, or natural and man-made disasters. As Korstanje puts it in his concluding remarks (2017, p. 118) 'in our days capitalism has show [sic.] itself to be a productive machine that has caused serious inequalities worldwide'. Its novel form - what he terms 'thana-capitalism' - reveals a globalised economic system based on the commoditisation of forms of death. Such commoditisation processes take place in surviving concentration and migration camps,

BOOK REVIEW

sites of past deaths or mass murders, dark and slum tourist areas but also sites of terrorist activity and natural or technologically induced disasters, which are reduced to tourismified objects.

Korstanje is one of the rising stars of the post-Marxist schools of academic thought. An incredibly prolific scholar, he regularly produces critical interventions on up-to-date world events by considering state-of-the-art literature in several fields, including those of social theory, economics, tourism and anthropology. The present article is intended as a critical review of *Thana-Capitalism*, in that it proffers an alternative judgment (*krisis*: critical engagement) of the conditions of late or post modernity, in which socialities and solidarities are, by and large, 'damaged' according to Korstanje's thesis, almost beyond repair.

#### **The book's thesis in detail**

In Chapter 1, Korstanje unpacks the notion of 'dark tourism', by having recourse to its roots in *thanatopsis* or the practice of gazing upon death. This gazing activates a *Schadenfreude* mechanism: consumers look at other people's

death and feel good for being alive. There is already a hint of Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* (1996) in this argument, which is further unpacked by example in Chapter 2, even though Nietzsche's philosophy is only recalled via other studies (see Korstanje's discussion of my work in pp. 35-37). In Chapter 2, we learn more about this new class of consumers of death, which Korstanje calls 'death seekers', and who sharpen what he recognises as their 'sadist drive', by engaging with those in need. He uses as case in point slum and dark site visitations by global tourists, who can feel superior to the objects of their gaze, thus transforming suffering into a commodity. In Chapter 3 focus shifts to an analysis of humanitarian after the 2011 Japanese Earthquake and the Fukujima nuclear accident. Korstanje reverts to Jean Baudrillard's thesis on the rise of spectacular simulation to explain such interventions, including those provided by Japanese diasporic communities that can 'perform' charity at a distance in self-gratifying ways.

Chapter 4 reverts, in a fashion resembling Paul Eliade's (1989) work on myth, to some archetypal constructions of 'good' and 'evil' that function as moral parables in late or post-modern thana-capitalist structures. Korstanje is keen to rectify established sociological paradigms stemming from the works of Beck, Giddens and even Marx, as well as philosophical observations supported by Žižek (2003), who identified humanity's proto-revolutionary spirit in the Pauline legacy. Korstanje alternatively argues that Christ's originary suffering split the world into victims and observers, thus laying the foundations of contemporary capitalist exploitation. The suffering Christ is now reproduced by cultural industries as a spectacle in a variety of consumption sites, including those of media and tourism, and Korstanje is quick to provide readings of specific popular cultural products through this lens. In Chapters 5 and 6 he interrogates continuities between 'thana-capitalism' and 'bio-capitalism', the of profit-production through the commoditization of death and life respectively. He argues that thana- and bio-capitalisms consolidated archetypal continuities between the super-

human suffering Christ and popular cultural icons, such as those of Batman. This bureaucratic management of *Bios* (life) and *Thanatos* (death) was first facilitated by the ideological triumph of Darwinism on both sides of the Atlantic: Hitler's Nazi *Übermensch* and American social Darwinism degenerated into racism. An interplay between self-control and indulgence, necessary for the maintenance of the new group of narcissistic 'death-seekers', forms the basis for the global ideological hegemony of what Korstanje calls the 'Anglo race', which is puritan in socio-cultural habits. In this final Chapter (7), we find particular takes of Weber's work (1985), in which capitalists choose to be chosen, or Campbell's (2005), in which consumers are in search of neo-Romantic liberation from the shackles of modernity. But for Korstanje, the ultimate product of this consumerist drive is genomics and the management of life by a 'medical(-ized) gaze', which divides humans into 'worthy' and 'unworthy' subjects and objects respectively.

#### **A different critical perspective**

The book's ethical core can be traced in the 1970s/1980s 'cultural imperialism' argument from globalisation studies, which was applied to media, tourism and consumption/leisure studies at large. The general consensus is in more recent studies not to treat leisure/tourism as mere consumerist rituals addressed to cultural 'dupes'. First, this analysis validates divides between high/elite and low/popular culture, which are essentially elitist, turning scholars into pontificating actors. Also, tourists come with a variety of motivations, including as diverse pursuits as those of insensitive self-education (in visits to slums) and respectful pilgrimage to the lands of ancestors (as dark tourism). By the same token, tourist and media industries are not just profit-making machines, but also, upon criticism, agents rectifying the wrongs of systemic economic and social inequality. Thana-capitalist exploitation of populations and entrenched memories is only one version of what truly happens in practice, when sites of death become consumption hot spots. Perversely, the argument that we ought to

preserve thanatic memories in dark and slum sites intact, reproduces the Romantic gaze of the Grand Tourist, who could also be a colonial administrator and scholar managing colonised difference. The same purist thesis has been contested in memory studies, with scholars pointing out that 'fixing' memories is constitutive of the politics of nationalist, racist and sexist violence.

The very idea of the suffering hosts, who are gazed upon by consumers/guests, denies them progressive identity formation and reflexivity. First, those gazed upon cannot be lumped together as an amorphous mass: they can be poor or affluent, black or white, male or female, entrepreneurs or common workers, of progressive or retrogressive outlooks, and so forth. All these groups change positionality in time, so we also need contextualisation – on which, Korstanje provides specific examples that cannot be generalised. Second, as explained by others (Maoz 2006; Tzanelli 2015), hosts and guests gaze upon each other mutually and critically, often rectifying real power imbalances in performative ways, by concealing or exacerbating the 'disreputable properties' of the tourist sites and the host communities. Third, gazing upon problems in dark/slum sites can also enable the production of mechanisms that address social and cultural problems. In tandem, it is wrong to causally locate problems of poverty and inequality exclusively in the 'developed World' ('dark tourism does all these'), when native custom and heritage can disadvantage segments of the native populations, including ethnic minorities and women. No genuine humanitarian actor, who may act as agent of change, can exist prior to engagement in spectatorship and inspection of 'problems', as Boltanski (1999) notes, after Hannah Arendt.

I find much merit in Korstanje's analysis, despite my critical stance of his book. To summarise my counter-polemic, which exists in a dialogical relationship to his, I can point to his use of Christopher Lasch's (1991) 'culture of narcissism': the idea that consuming subjects (e.g. dark and/or slum tourist gazers) develop narcissistic tendencies ('me first in consuming the other'), by internalising the

figure of the Mother, 'or at least caretaker' (Korstanje 2017: viii), reinstates the patriarchal order and a heterosexual matrix (Butler 1993, 2007) as a sort of 'consumerist matrix'. This merely displaces the problem of equitable regard of humans in dark and tourist sites to the 'First World' consumer, who is symbolically feminised *thus synecdochically* being regarded an amoral subject. This semi-conscious feminisation of consumption merely reflects a more generic battle launched by cultural imperialism proponents against hybridity, the blending of outlooks and practices, and the pollution of dark heritage spots by tourists. This is at odds with Korstanje's own commitment to gender equality and equitable collegial exchange, of which I have been a personal witness. It is, however, also a good example of the ways our commitments to particular political agendas generate dialectical paradoxes – for, as Korstanje explains, at the other extreme, the feminised consumer can be blind to inequalities in favour of a 'good time'.

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