



Anna Tsing on mushrooms & capitalism

Access the podcast at:

<https://doi.org/10.1787/b843cf99-en>

Please cite this podcast as:

OECD (2019), “Anna Tsing on mushrooms & capitalism”, *OECD Podcasts*, Duration: 21:04, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/b843cf99-en>.

Host: Clara Young

Speaker: Anna Tsing

Duration: 21:04

Date: 29 September 2019

All podcasts express the opinions of the interview subjects and do not necessarily represent the official views of the OECD and/or OECD Member countries.

This document, as well as any data and map included herein, are without prejudice to the status of or sovereignty over any territory, to the delimitation of international frontiers and boundaries and to the name of any territory, city or area. Extracts from publications may be subject to additional disclaimers, which are set out in the complete version of the publication, available at the link provided.

The use of this work, whether digital or print, is governed by the Terms and Conditions to be found at <http://www.oecd.org/termsandconditions>.

Anna Tsing on mushrooms & capitalism

Intro [00:00:06] Welcome to our OECD Podcasts, where policy meets people.

Clara Young [00:00:11] When companies frack for shale oil and gas, they drill until the well stops producing, and then move. More or less, the same goes for other primary industries, like strip mining, logging and fishing, where roughly put, we extract the resources, abandon site and move on.

Clara Young [00:00:28] I'm Clara Young and I'm talking to Anna Tsing, who's a professor of anthropology at the University of California in Santa Cruz. She's also the author of *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. She takes the Matsutake mushroom and traces its supply chain from the forests of Oregon and Yunnan to Japan, where it is a rare and expensive autumn delicacy. We'll be talking about what the global Matsutake trade can teach us about ecology and market capitalism.

Clara Young [00:01:00] Thanks for joining me, Anna.

Anna Tsing [00:01:02] Thank you.

Clara Young [00:01:03] So the common name for the Matsutake is Pine Mushroom, right?

Anna Tsing [00:01:07] That's right, at least in some places in the United States. It's called Pine Mushroom because it always grows with pines.

Clara Young [00:01:13] Right. And just to give us an idea, what does it taste and smell like? What's so special about it?

Anna Tsing [00:01:19] The mushroom is special because of its smell, more than its taste. And it has a very distinctive smell. And some people think the smell is terrible and others think it's beautiful.

Clara Young [00:01:33] Right. But what do you think?

Anna Tsing [00:01:35] I moved from having been quite disturbed by the smell to loving it. So now I love it. But I should say that one American mycologist, who perhaps has some of the sensitivities of Americans, described it as a provocative juxtaposition between red hots — that's a cinnamon candy — and dirty socks.

Clara Young [00:01:58] OK. I think I get an idea what that could smell like. And how much is an average size mushroom worth?

Anna Tsing [00:02:06] Well, it completely depends that the buyers are very interested in the provenance of the mushrooms and the smell of the mushroom, the freshness of the mushroom. So the most expensive

mushrooms could be quite expensive. I've seen them on sale relatively recently for 150 U.S. dollars for one mushroom in Japan. And the very first mushroom of the season, which is a very special mushroom that goes for highest prices for 4,000 US dollars last year.

Clara Young [00:02:42] I see. Now, why did you settle on this mushroom as the commodity through which to tell the story of modern capitalism?

Anna Tsing [00:02:53] I was looking for a commodity that hadn't been so regularised by the trade that you could still see the kinds of cultural friction that went on at different parts of the commodity chain. And when someone told me about Matsutake, I was amazed, but even, didn't appreciate the strange and wonderfulness of the commodity chain until I was in the middle of the research, until I saw for myself how, at many points in the chain, there are deep misunderstandings about why people like the mushroom, what's going on about this mushroom, at the same time, its huge excitement at every part of the chain. So it had this combination of very different worlds and the thrill of bringing it across those worlds.

Clara Young [00:03:45] Now, geographically, what are the main parts of the chain that all eventually lead to Japan? Where are they mostly found?

Anna Tsing [00:03:53] Well, while the mushroom is really valuable, mainly in Japan, it turns out that it's found in much of the northern hemisphere. But it's a mushroom that never grows by itself. No one succeeded in growing it in a greenhouse or even in a laboratory. So it always grows in forests with the roots of trees. So when I say "around the northern hemisphere", it's only in places particularly where there's pine trees, although it will also grow with some other kinds of trees.

Clara Young [00:04:23] And the Matsutake mushrooms were the first living things to grow in Hiroshima after the atomic bomb. Right?

Anna Tsing [00:04:30] Well, that is a common story that's told. And I was told by at least one researcher that there had been Japanese newspaper articles about this, but I never found those myself. So I heard that story from many people in China and Japan, but I was never able to verify it. But of course, it makes sense because the timing of the bomb, which was, I think in late August and the mushrooms are coming out at the end of August, the beginning of September, and if there were any pine trees where the roots were still living, the Matsutake would have come up.

Clara Young [00:05:07] There's a connection between what you call ruin, or human disturbance, and the mushroom itself. What is that connection?

Anna Tsing [00:05:16] There's a number of ways of understanding the connections. The people who told me the story about Hiroshima were trying to argue that this mushroom to them symbolised a kind of perseverance and strength, the ability to grow in adversity that they hoped might make those who consume his mushroom strong also.

Anna Tsing [00:05:38] But for me, as a researcher, when I realised that this mushroom grows in kinds of forests that are not pristine, beautiful wilderness, but often quite intensively disturbed by logging, by farming, by all kinds of things that humans do, as well as natural disasters such as volcanoes, mudslides, the blowing of sand, that this is a mushroom that does well in what we think of as rather adverse conditions. So in that sense, the mushroom came to me to be a way to tell stories about kinds of organisms that are able to continue despite many kinds of troubles coming their way.

Clara Young [00:06:29] OK, so we're definitely going to be coming back to that question at the end of the interview, when we talk about climate change. But what happened to the mushroom supply in Japan, that the Japanese started importing elsewhere?

Anna Tsing [00:06:42] It took me by surprise, as an American, to hear this story, because it reverses many of the valences that Americans think of, when we think about what goes wrong. But from the Japanese point of view, village forests stopped being used as village force at the end of World War Two. The reason is fossil fuels became cheap. People began to heat with fossil fuels. They didn't need firewood and the kerosene came in instead of charcoal. And then many people moved to the city, and the rural areas were depopulated. Older people lived there who did less work in maintaining the farms and forests. Village forests were abandoned.

Anna Tsing [00:07:30] And in this abandonment, a new kind of tree grew up. Evergreen Oaks grew up where Deciduous Oaks had grown before, and pine trees were smothered, as well as a new imported pest coming in. And especially under these difficult environmental conditions, pine trees died. And when the pine trees died, the Matsutake, which was a companion of pine, died too.

Anna Tsing [00:07:56] It was only by the 1970s that it became evident that the dying of the pine trees, due in part to the abandonment of village forests, became clear and Matsutake, from something that was quite easy to find in village forests, became something very rare. And just at that time, in the late '70s and the 1980s, the Japanese economy was booming. So the price of Matsutake shot up because of its rarity.

Clara Young [00:08:26] And because of that, they began to look elsewhere.

Anna Tsing [00:08:29] That's right.

Clara Young [00:08:30] And that is about roughly the time as well, that, for example, in the automobile industry, that the Japanese began to outsource the automobile industry to Southeast Asia, particularly to Korea. And you make that connection there as well.

Anna Tsing [00:08:48] This was a period of rising wealth in Japan, and the Japanese have imagined their island as without some of the key resources they need for economic development. They pioneered a kind of model which has taken over much of the world now, in which they would encourage supply chains, often very long chains, to distant places, by giving funding to suppliers, to encouraging suppliers, and then through trade and companies bringing those resources into Japan. So Matsutake was one of many, many

kinds of resources that were coming into Japan at that period, as they were developing this supply chain model that became so popular that it took off in many places around the world.

Clara Young [00:09:36] One thing that you talk about, the supply chain for the Matsutake mushrooms, is that for the people who were pickers, and you talk about freedom, could you go into that a bit more?

Anna Tsing [00:09:50] Sure. The scene in this place took me by surprise that most of the forest here is owned by the federal government, its national forest. Yet you can get a permit to pick and camp there. And I do other kinds of things, like hunting or hiking there also, but in the fall, mushroom pickers come in large groups if the price is at all high, and two groups seemed particularly prevalent there. One had to do with white pickers who often were veterans of the U.S. Indochina wars, as well as former loggers and other rural people. And the other were refugees from Southeast Asia, from those same U.S. Indochina wars, where in the 1980s the U.S. had created the possibilities of immigration from those wars. And people from Laos and Cambodia, in particular, came to Oregon to pick the mushrooms.

Anna Tsing [00:10:54] Those groups all had commitments to something that they called freedom, and that mushroom picking was helping them to achieve what they called freedom. Part of what took me by surprise is they meant very different things by freedom, and that even though they agreed on this common word, they didn't mean the same things by it. So that it ranged from, there were pickers from a South East Asian group called the Mien. And Mien families came up to pick mushrooms together, and they were particularly interested in reconstituting the village life that they had known back in Laos or in northern Thailand, where some moved out from Laos, that they saw the freedom of mobility, and the freedom to see your neighbours, the freedom to not be in cramped urban apartments, that that was one kind of freedom.

Anna Tsing [00:11:52] And yet it contrasted, or came together with others who came there, for example, freedom, meaning anticommunism, that the continuing struggle that some of the refugees felt to fight against communism in all its forms, that some of them saw that, while others saw, especially Cambodian refugees, were likely to have disabilities that came from their involvement in the civil wars in Cambodia. And for them, freedom often meant just the ability to make a living despite your disabilities, to get out there and make an independent living. So these many different meanings of freedom came together.

Clara Young [00:12:34] And these were quite marginalised groups.

Anna Tsing [00:12:37] Yes, that's right.

Clara Young [00:12:39] Now, why is that important to understand this, in understanding supply chains, and supply chains in more conventional products like cars or cell phones and that kind of... What does this tell us?

Anna Tsing [00:12:53] I think the most conventional way to understand supply chains is that the only thing that matters is price, from one part of the chain to another. But in fact, there's a great deal of negotiation of something you might call value, that means much more than price. Which is: why is anyone doing this work? What are they getting out of it? Both the money that they might get, but other things that they might

get, and that the supply chain model has depended on mobilising labour force for reasons other than wages, that in many cases people's wages and supply chains are very low. So supply chains mobilise people through ethnicity, through religion, through all kinds of factors that are beyond how much they're going to pay them.

Anna Tsing [00:13:41] And it's one of the ways that supply chains have been different than the kind of corporate formal labour contracts that in the 20th century, many of us imagined as the way that the economy was properly organised, that the supply chains instead draw people who perhaps are unable to work in other ways but create possibilities to work that may have some kind of local meaning, as they did to these mushroom pickers that brings them into the workforce.

Anna Tsing [00:14:14] On the one hand, you could argue that this is a form of super exploitation, in which people are going along with their own poor payment. On the other hand, there are also ways that people are drawn in to economic pursuits, because of things that matter to them.

Clara Young [00:14:33] Consequences of supply chains is the problem of responsibility of employers, because you're outsourcing it all. By understanding a little bit better how workers get involved in these supply chains, what kind of conclusion can we draw about responsibility — corporate responsibility?

Anna Tsing [00:14:53] Corporations in many cases have abrogated their responsibilities. And I do think that's something that citizens around the world should be concerned about. Indeed, even as the mushroom pickers were doing something that was quite wonderful for them, in most cases, it's the ability of employers to lose responsibility, for example, to hire people who are unable to get jobs, perhaps because they're women. And they play on those disabilities to bring people into the workforce. So rather than celebrating the lack of responsibility, that's really a characteristic of employment in our time, I think we should be paying attention to the injustice of just this kind of system as we go forward and figure out how to, you know, what kind of world we want to live in.

Clara Young [00:15:51] Mm hmm. The subtitle of your book is "On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins". What is this possibility?

Anna Tsing [00:16:00] As I learnt about the economy of the Matsutake mushroom, I also learnt about the life world to the mushroom itself, that everyone I spoke to, whether they were a businessman, a picker, or a forest manager, wanted to tell me about the mushroom. And the stories about the mushroom took me by surprise because they were often stories about how this mushroom could survive in difficult times. That in Oregon, for example, this area had been a centre of logging earlier in the 20th century, and then they had taken out all the valuable logs, and there was nothing left except the kind of ruins of logging, so there was logging going on, but it was not very valuable. In fact, in many years, the mushrooms were more valuable than the trees. It was very lucky that mushrooms happened to grow up in this place. And so it doesn't always work out that way.

Anna Tsing [00:16:56] But the reason it's so important for us to think about is because we've created a world with the ruins of so many different industrial enterprises all around us. So on the one hand, we're going to have to think about what kinds of livelihoods we might be able to gain. And on the other, it's a

reason to really respect those kinds of living things that are capable of growing up in those ruins to figure out ways that we can encourage the regrowth of living things, even where destruction has happened in the past.

Clara Young [00:17:34] I think my last question is this, is about your idea of plantations versus peasant woodlands, or the latent commons as a possible model for economic activity, but also salvaging this environment that we have that's going through climate change.

Anna Tsing [00:17:59] Well, maybe the place to work on answering that question is, as ways of thinking that part of the reason that I like to contrast the plantation and the mushroom forest is because too much of our thinking assumes that the natural world and the social world are in a grid, and that we start from a rationalised arrangement of people and resources, and then we think forward with that. But so many situations in our world are not like that. In fact, the liveliest, like the Matsutake forest, these forests that have survived human disturbance and have so much growing in them. And so the reason for the contrast is so that we might begin to perhaps value these less cleanly organised kinds of social arrangements, including non-human social arrangements, rather than just those that seem lined up for our use.

Clara Young [00:19:05] That are a completely rational, scalable...

Anna Tsing [00:19:08] Right.

Clara Young [00:19:09] Models of salvage or production.

Anna Tsing [00:19:13] And the latent commons, perhaps, is also a method of thinking forward from where we are, given the problems that we have in the world, which are that we need to figure out a set of collaborators, allies, friends who are not humans, as well as humans, that we too often imagined ourselves as humans, as masters of the natural world, that crops would be our friends when we controlled them completely. And it's turned out not to work out that way. The more we try to control them, the more harmful pests and pathogens come to haunt us.

Anna Tsing [00:19:55] So to instead make common cause with some of the less cleanly arrayed kinds of non-humans that are capable of going forward with us in this disturbed world, like Matsutake and Matsutake forests, that those are the ones that we need to cultivate as our friends in some way. And the latent commons is just the openness to look for human and non-human allies who could help us keep at least some parts of our world liveable for humans and our companion species.

Clara Young [00:20:31] Thank you for talking to me, Anna.

Anna Tsing [00:20:33] Thank you.

Clara Young [00:20:34] And thanks for listening to our OECD Podcasts. I'm Clara Young. Anna Tsing's book is *The Mushroom at the End of the World : On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*.

Outro [00:20:47] To listen to other OECD Podcasts, find us on iTunes, Spotify, Google Podcasts and soundcloud.com/oecd.