A Review of “The rise of thana-capitalism and tourism” by Maximiliano E. Korstanje

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BOOK REVIEW


Maximiliano Korstanje’s The Rise of Thana-Capitalism and Tourism is a deeply thoughtful and provocative work which explores the apparent rise of the obsession with death in today’s society. Marrying philosophical and theological debates with economic theory, Korstanje paints a critical view of the world today, a world in which everyone fights for survival in a social Darwinist (thana-) capitalist system constructed to suppress them. The result of this is a constant quest for survival and ergo, an obsession with death. The main thesis of the book is that thanatourism (visiting sites of death and suffering) is an increasingly popular holiday activity as people in thana-capitalist societies want to consume death to provide them with validation that they are winning the game of life. Thanatourists, or ‘death seekers’ as Korstanje describes them, gain satisfaction and a sense of superiority over the dead at such sites.

The book, although short in length, is a stimulating yet challenging read, particularly if one is not familiar with some of the many philosophical references used to build the author’s argument. It is comprised of seven chapters with a preface, introduction and conclusion. The reader is told that each chapter can be read independently, which makes sense given that most of the chapters cover quite similar material. The book starts with an introduction to Korstanje’s overriding argument of the book: that the narcissistic self consumes death for self-gratification. This is the result of the capitalist mantra ‘the winner takes it all’; winning depends on survival, and therefore, the rejection of death. Following this argument, the introduction suggests that sites of death and suffering are recycled by the system into sites of consumption. The ‘death seeker’ visits these sites of death in order to reinforce their sense of superiority: ‘they are dead, and I am alive, therefore I am winning’.

Chapter 1 explores how the development of dark tourism is the result of thanaptosis, man’s understanding of death through the death of others. Rather than seeing dark tourism as educational, Korstanje argues it instead serves the purpose of enhancing our egos, for we have escaped death unlike those who perished at the site of death. This, he argues, is the result of capitalism, whose ideology offers salvation for the few at the expense of the rest. Furthermore, he claims the spectacle of the disaster in thanatourism serves the capitalist elite as it clouds our gaze on the real cause of these disasters (i.e. capitalism). Chapter 2 further develops Korstanje’s scathing criticism of modern capitalism, and consequently, tourism. The author dissects the link between capitalism and human suffering, demonstrating how capitalism creates a culture of poverty where social Darwinism places the blame of poverty on the poor. He takes the example of ‘slum tourism’ arguing that tourists visit ‘slums’ to feel a sense of happiness from others’ suffering, as it temporarily helps them forget their own suffering. Chapter 3 continues the theme of resting heavily on philosophical ideas, in particular, this time on those of Baudrillard over mankind’s dealings with tragedy. How do humans make sense of disaster? Korstanje explains how consumerism and nationalism help ensure that nations do not crumble in the face of tragedy. He also develops a more intriguing notion, that of the chauvinist survivor, who, due to their survival, has an exaggerated sense of self-importance. At the end of the chapter, he briefly uses an example of a dark tourism tour to Japan following the Fukushima disaster, showing how tourists wish to see disaster, especially if it is done at such a distance as to gain the feeling of taking a risk without ever actually doing so.
Korstanje makes a compelling argument in Chapter 4 that man has become increasingly fascinated and fearful of death as our imagination and belief in God has declined. Given we are no longer so sure of a better afterlife, the thought of our own death becomes a source of deep anxiety and intrigue. For this reason, our lives and our economies depend on death: memorializing it and consuming it. Chapters 5 and 6 present thoughtful discussions which try to explain mankind’s obsession with death, using for instance Slovenian philosopher Žižek’s dissection of Christianity as a religion based on betrayal and the crucifixion of Jesus as the first theatricalization of suffering. Korstanje’s own reflections on the story of Noah are enlightening – Noah is celebrated even though his survival came at the cost of all the rest of humanity, which supports his argument of survivor’s egotism and their belief in being the ‘chosen ones’. The final chapter takes a swipe at the ‘Anglo-democracy’ where big business has filled the void between lay citizens and the representatives they elected. This is the result of a capitalist system that has demonstrated increasingly social Darwinist principles. Korstanje traces this to the American adoption of the Nazi ideology of a master race; success built on subjugation of Untermenschen and the use of fear. The spread of ‘American fear culture’ results in the emergence of the ‘death seeker’ class who have become obsessed with their own deaths. The book concludes succinctly, underlining the key arguments of the chapters and warning us to be aware that despite decreasing global violence, there remains significant grinding inequality.

One of the best truisms in the book is that tourism exhibits the main values of society and should not be considered a naïve activity. The book is a must read for anyone studying thanacapitalism or thanatourism or who is merely interested in the role of death in today’s society more generally. It provides an alternative view to that of most normative work, one rooted in philosophical arguments. The book raises some soul-searching questions as to why tourists visit sites of death and suffering; primarily, do we visit such places to feel better about ourselves? It also hints at other interesting realities of dark tourism such as how tourists seek out places of suffering but also simultaneously wish to avoid real danger (see also Belhassen et al., 2013). The more abstract parts of the book were illuminating in trying to gain an understanding of society’s fascination with death, with thoughtful reflections on the relationships between religion, witchcraft, modernity and death. Overall, the book’s merits lie in provoking debate on the motivations of thanatourists and thanatourism’s place within a thana-capitalist society.

However, this is not a book for those who wish to find empirical evidence on thanacapitalism or tourism. Examples provided, such as on ‘slum tourism’, remain without qualitative or quantitative backing and are presented as wonderings supported by primarily philosophical literature. The result is that the book comes across more as an opinion piece, which can prove quite controversial reading at times. Its main thrust is that tourists who visit sites of death are narcissistic and seeking only satisfaction from the death of others, which is both potentially insulting to those with personal connections to such sights but it also does not consider the myriad of experiences that can be felt at such sites – I can recommend autoethnographic studies such as Ria Dunkley at Tyne Cot (2007) or Carol Kidron at Auschwitz (2013). The book also appears to reject the potentially positive role tourism could play in places where disaster has struck, roles that can involve rebuilding local economies or inspiring confidence. Moreover, conceptually, the reader can be left somewhat confused, particularly on Korstanje’s thoughts on God. While on the one hand, society’s lack of faith is purported to be one of the reasons why death has become so terrifying for modern man, on the other hand, God is presented as one of the reasons for survivor’s narcissism (their belief in being chosen) with biblical mythologies presented as essential to our modern day obsession with death.

To conclude, although the book suffers from repetition – death-culture examples such as the Hunger Games, 9/11 and Big Brother are used multiple times throughout - and strikes a deeply pessimistic view of modern society which some readers may find difficult, the book
would certainly serve well those interested in exploring death’s pervasiveness in our society. It provides a controversial yet thought provoking take on the relationship between capitalism, death and dark tourism. A timely contribution to the literature in a world increasingly confronted by insecurity and terror.

References


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