

## Rethinking Subjects of Theory through Situated Matters of Eating

Review by Elin Linder

Annemarie Mol, 2021, *Eating in Theory*, Durham: Duke University Press, 195 pp., ISBN 978-1-47801-292-4

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The recent book by the philosopher and anthropologist Annemarie Mol takes the form of an inspirational exercise of sorts. She uses exemplified stories on eating to challenge predominant philosophical ideas of the existence of *one* particular human, namely that of *the thinking* one, as standing above the surrounding by which it is sustained. By demonstrating that all human beings have a body through which they are fundamentally entangled with their surroundings (33), such as through eating, Mol provides suggestions for addressing the corporeal, let alone diversified, character of what it means to be human when engaging human theory. This is an argument positioned against theoretical canons upholding, on the one hand, the action of *thinking* as more fundamental to life than that of *eating*, which is of secondary purpose according to such philosophies, and on the other, the *thinking subject* as more advanced in its human being—also knowing, doing, and relating—than that of the *eating subject*. Counteracting such theoretical orientations, and especially those of twentieth century humanism, where *the thinking* human is theorized as having a free will and being set apart from all other organisms, Mol critically invites for theories concerned with human *being, knowing, doing, and relating*, to take seriously the dynamic vitality of humans to eat—to be fed by and to feed others, both human and non-human in kind.

Considering the issue at hand of how grand explanatory models, which commonly comes from a particular male and westernized perspective, and which rarely acknowledges the situated position of that perspective in making philosophical claims about humankind, the writing seeks to shake up Theory with a capital T. Moll does this vividly and curiously, let alone critically, although somewhat shallowly, by thinking through situated matters of eating.

She does so discursively and ethnographically through exemplifying particular narratives concerning language and practice. Her aim is to twist and turn humanist perspectives by which the supposedly *thinking subject* of a particularly enhanced human “goes into hiding” (25). Finally, Moll's mission is to advance contextually embedded understandings of humans; whether engaged in activities of thinking, eating, or other, whether taking place here and now or then and there, and whether approached ethnographically or philosophically. Through all these dimensions, the inspirational exercise presented by Mol rather provocatively challenges any disembodied and distangled loci of existence inherent in Theory. Moreover, and by means of contemplating how certain seminal philosophical works, such as for instance by Descartes and Ardent, are devoid of corporeal and situated dynamics, the book quite forcefully provides a case for the diversified toolbox of situated descriptions for Theory that the author calls for.

Given the above, the book arguably provides more inspirational exercise for philosophical subjects of Theory, than for anthropological theories of subjects. However, in its nonhuman emphasis, it nevertheless also supplies food-for-thought for anthropological thinking. Moreover, while the book is a rather easy read, at times also an intriguing one, for those used to contextual probing of situated matters generally, those concerned with standpoint theory, corporeality, food, and nonhuman perspectives particularly, it is rather confirmatory of such thinking than deepening thereof. Hence, insofar as readers seek novel insights, the book arguably serves a more enticing piece of work for those either fairly new to, or largely unfamiliar with, context-critical awareness, than it does for those already accustomed to such perspectives. The main reason for this is that whereas the writing for the former audience provides critical points of consideration to the subject matters at hand, it leaves for the latter much left to be regarded. That said, and to be fair to the purpose of the book, considering that the pursuit is to provide lessons for [T]heory, and to do so by diversely engaging notions of the human subject, not as *someone* set apart from the surrounding of her existence, but as particular *someones* enmeshed within it, the writing makes an excellent job of contextualizing the need for situated accounts when theorizing human *being, knowing, doing, and relating*.

Stylistically speaking, the work appears rather talkative, and it may for given readers come across as too brief in character for substantiating the lessons claimed. However, considering that the book seeks not to provide any theoretical conclusions (4-5), nor any advanced theoretical contemplations, but to make use of matters of eating in providing space for

(re)thinking Theory in other senses than commonly done by twentieth century humanism, its conversational tone in some respects epitomize its own purpose. Moreover, the book takes on a rather example–argument kind of reasoning, and while this serves each argument quite well, more often than not, the writing does not provide enough detail for readers to make their own situated understandings of the ethnographic realities of each example. Lastly, the book features two parallel stories, of which the secondary storyline speaks to the mission to probe the significance of language in situations, and the main text to the pursuit of advancing lessons for theory through ethnographic-laden encounters. Though this makes the book shorter page-wise, it also makes it thinner argument-wise, wherefore it might have served the overall purpose of the book better to incorporate the secondary text into the main one. If nothing else, it would have made for a more cohesive read.

By way of wrapping up, the work is from beginning to end straightforwardly not about eating *per se*, but about using practices of eating in critically situating humans—their *being*, *doing*, *knowing*, and *relating*—to the conditional and interdependent circumstances of their existence. Hence, rather than providing theoretical accounts of eating, as the title of the book may give a sense of, and misleadingly so, eating provides a set of lessons for how theory may better account for how humans become not only relationally to their thinking, but also to that of their eating. And so, in detailing much of her critical reflection on a certain valued practice of *thinking* over those of *eating*, Mol eloquently brings into the limelight the vitality of abandoning grand theories aimed at explaining all human beings, and especially those not situated in their own theorization.

**Elin Linder** is a PhD Student in the department of Social Anthropology at Stockholm University. She is keen to explore human and beyond human interrelatedness and has a particular interest in sensuously unfolding the socio-material workings, value landscapes, and situated practices and knowledges through which particular human and more-than-human assemblages materialize in time and space. Linder's master's thesis deals with matters of everyday food practices and her doctoral research project examines the interplay between people, material matters, discourses, and practices as it unfolds in the world of *olivicoltura* in the region of Apulia, the heel of Italy.



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