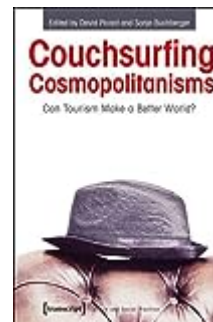




David Picard, Sonja Buchberger, eds. *Couchsurfing Cosmopolitanisms: Can Tourism Make a Better World?* Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2013. 192 pp. EUR 25.80 (paper), ISBN 978-3-8376-2255-3.



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How Couchsurfing Succeeds. And Fails

Couchsurfing Cosmopolitanisms opens with a description of the actual couchsurfing experience, illustrating how this system works and making the practice comprehensible for those who are not familiar with it. This approach reflects the aim of the book, one of the first collections of articles on the topic: "to provide fresh data from a greater range of ethnographic settings in which online-to-offline hospitality exchanges take place" (p. 13). This goal is indeed fulfilled, as most of the articles are based on the authors' couchsurfing experiences. These often self-reflective chapters are supplemented with more general ones explaining the history of couchsurfing, its traditions, and its taboos. The reader will be agreeably surprised by the variety of research methods the authors use: the articles are based on the data generated from participant observation, interviews, surveys, discussion forums, analyses of websites, statistical calculations, and so forth.

Starting from the general description of couchsurfing ideals, the authors elaborate on local examples, showing that the ways the practice works in different countries depend on their guest-receiving traditions. What

seems to be especially important is that the analyzed settings are mainly non-Western, contrasted with rather occasional European examples, such as Lisbon. This choice lets the authors explore the old topic of stereotypes and "others," giving it new meaning when seen from the couchsurfing angle. For instance, Dennis Zuev demonstrates frictions involving clashes between different regimes of hospitality—in particular, couchsurfing ideals and the Siberian culture of guest-receiving. De-Jung Chen successfully shows how Taiwanese learn to perform the social role of the exotic, so as to be liked by those who "dictate" the rules (Westerners). Sonja Buchberger challenges the declared open-mindedness of couchsurfing, showing how Tunisians feel excluded from the Western couchsurfing transcript due to their difference in religion, ethnicity, and hospitality ethics. Thus, as Jenny German Molz justly argues, couchsurfing "offers us an empirical lens through which to explore fundamental tensions that shape society today" (p. 63). In this sense, the authors go far beyond the question that the editors suggest is central to the whole book: why and how

travel and hospitality could create a "better world." In contrast, they successfully show that by basing the practice of couchsurfing on a cosmopolitan ideal, which is ready to accept everyone, couchsurfing fails, because this ideal itself makes certain groups feel excluded and alienated.

In fact, cosmopolitanism is manifested in the title and becomes the main point for deconstruction in the analysis of couchsurfing. Cosmopolitan ideas and their pitfalls often become the target of criticism, and framing couchsurfing within this critique results in mere repetition of examples from couchsurfing of how cosmopolitanism fails. Thus, the authors' good and interesting analysis of other aspects of couchsurfing in this book is lost in the cosmopolitanism frame. This also poses a problem, as cosmopolitanism does not seem to be a central idea either of the couchsurfing website (couchsurfing.org) or for multiple couchsurfers I have encountered personally. Cosmopolitanism becomes an analytic construction that the authors of the book first impose on the practice and later deconstruct. Moreover, their approach, which documents the emergence and increasing popularity of a certain travel practice and criticizes its idealist intentions related to this imputed cosmopolitanism, is not new.^[1] In its turn, it is related to the scholarship on the negative impact of tourism, such as Martin Mowforth and colleagues' *Tourism and Responsibility: Perspectives from Latin America and the Caribbean* (2008), and the failure of other idealist projects of improving the human condition, such as James Scott's *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (1998). The authors' neglect of the research done in this field and their uncritical application of the concept of cosmopolitanism to couchsurfing constitute a major drawback of the book.

While I am uneasy about the term "cosmopolitanism," I agree with the adjectives authors use to describe it, though these terms can be equally applied to couchsurfing rather than cosmopolitanism. "Alternative" (cosmopolitanism) is related to the creation of a new couchsurfing identity as a response of those couchsurfers who feel marginalized by the dominant practices, as discussed in chapter 4. "Reflexive" (thinking, analyzing cosmopolitanism) is used in opposition to "banal" in chapter 7. Reflexive couchsurfing helps to create a metanarrative of trust based on meaningful interactions, providing the feeling of safety (that is so important when meeting strangers), and, in the end, establishing rules in the community. This approach, suggested by Jun E-Tan, analyzes strategic impression-management and trust-building in

couchsurfing, and seems to be very promising. The division between reflexive and banal cosmopolitanism also resembles the work of Ulrich Beck (e.g., *Cosmopolitan Vision* [2006]), to whom the authors of the volume often refer. Beck suggests a similar division and argues that unconscious and passive (banal) cosmopolitanism is only a type of enforced cosmopolitanization rather than a critical tool for reforming imperfect cosmopolitan realities.

Although the book declares couchsurfing as a main subject of analysis (even in its title), Molz in her chapter tries to embrace other hospitality websites. Her praiseworthy attempt to grasp a lot of material results in lumping together many different phenomena. The book would benefit from making distinctions between them and pointing out their difference from couchsurfing and its ideology. In spite of several separate notes devoted to them, the book lacks an actual description of each website's distinctiveness, although this certainly influences the participants' choice. Why would one turn from Couchsurfing to Hospitality Club or vice versa? Do their ideological differences result in different types of tensions in practice? The authors do not explore these questions.

Couchsurfing as an Internet phenomenon is also analyzed by Paula Bialski, who sees the website's function in the transfer of communication from online to offline. The rich historiographical analysis of research done on existing online-offline websites and the illuminating discussion of couchsurfing, seen from this angle, make the chapter much more appropriate for the beginning of the book than for its end.

Analyzing couchsurfing in Ho Chi Min, Bernard Schœou concludes that Confucian hospitality ideals determine Vietnamese couchsurfing. For example, the tendency to prioritize family over guests leads hosts to fear couchsurfing, hide couchsurfers from parents, and so on. The author tries to find other reasons for such behavior (isolationism, war, etc.), but ultimately, he sees Confucianism as a central one. Investing Confucianism with such overwhelming significance is dubious, as similar tendencies in couchsurfing exist in non-Confucian countries. For instance, in post-Soviet regions, long-lasting isolationism makes young peoples hide their couchsurfing "habit" from elderly members of the family who may not be used to foreigners.

Zuev's research, based on a single couchsurfing experience, in fact determined his whole position regarding the practice. All his further couchsurfing encounters have only confirmed this position, as he concludes

in the article. Using empirical material to support a pre-conceived theory is, of course, questionable. The author hosted an Argentinian-Spanish couchsurfer named Marco, who did not leave the house often and could not hike all day long, due to rain and probably poor physical fitness (as well as other possible reasons, such as tiredness, to which the author, concentrating on his own emotions throughout the article, did not pay attention). Meanwhile, Zuev had certain expectations (to hike, to leave the house often) from Marco, and when the surfer failed, the host drew the conclusion about a clash in hospitality styles. This conclusion seems valuable, but, to my mind, there is one more hidden topic in this article, central to many discussions couchsurfers have about their experiences: the authoritarian style of hosting that surfers often encounter. Although the author does not label his hosting style in this way, the editors of the volume seem to have perspicaciously noticed the additional value of including this article in the collection.

In fact, one would experience difficulties in attempting to write another comprehensive book on couchsurfing, as *Couchsurfing Cosmopolitanisms* exhaustively covers multiple topics with high contemporary relevance in

a very accessible way. Moreover, though this was not expressly stated as a goal of the book, Nelson Graburn and other authors identify topics for further study on the subject, such as the position that couchsurfers occupy in relation to mass tourism, parallels with other kinds of travelers (e.g., volunteers, homeswappers, hitchhikers), the commercialization of couchsurfing and the attitude of participants towards it, an emotional kick, and individual rules and boundaries. The book is designed not only for scholars interested in the topic, but also for couchsurfers, both as a guide for beginners and as a stimulus for introspection for the experienced.

Note

[1]. On volunteering, for example, see Katherine M. Borland, "Cosmopolitans in Ohio Face a Troubled World," paper presented at the Congress of the Latin American Studies Association, Toronto, Canada, October 6-9, 2010. Available at <http://lasa.international.pitt.edu/members/congress-papers/lasa2010/files/1761.pdf>.

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