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American Zoo: A Sociological Safari

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American Zoo is a shrewd examination of a persistent social institution, a major contribution for rethinking the nature/culture distinction, and a model of how to do and write up an ethnographic study. Grazian sells sociology to veterans, who will relive the attractions that got them committed to the field, and offers an eminently accessible invitation to newcomers in college classes.

The author has participated and observed as a volunteer and parenting father, interviewed, counted, taken information from institutional sources, drawn on historians’ tomes, analyzed the relevance of representations of animals in movies and children's books ... all the while vividly describing social life that is, in more than one sense, hidden under our noses. The central enigma of zoos connects this book to his prior studies of "blues" clubs and young adults' searching Philadelphia night life for self-illuminating experiences: how to understand the “authenticity” that visitors seek to find in caged and staged animals.

Grazian's analytical method is a simple strategy for revealing complexity. As might be found in any social institution (a university, a railroad station, a military training camp), the zoo is a place sustained by people who come to participate from disconnected biographies, perceive the same scenes in radically different ways, and manage to interact so that divergent, often conflicting meanings of the place pass unnoticed. At the zoo, some people work, others volunteer, government regulators inspect, parents fulfill childcare responsibilities, children build family history with cute reactions, romantic couples probe each other's responses, public relations workers develop ad campaigns, and donors are successfully solicited.
Enter the sociologist to supply a comprehension of the diverse, often conflicting subjective meanings that the zoo, issuing official mission statements that claim a transparent, consistent purpose, works to obscure. Because the sociologist’s contribution is to tap and to transcend the divergent meanings the place has for participants, the effort verges on hubris, which makes it wise that Grazian pulls off the effort with writing that is not only pellucid but exploits the juxtapositions of subjectively isolated perspectives for the humor that they incidentally make possible. We see how employees draw on Disney culture and train animals to hide their messy glory so that they may be enchanting to patrons; the misunderstandings that parents heartily convey to children (e.g., how hippos lay eggs); and the transformation that recurs in the careers of altruists who learn that the drudgery of animal care is only occasionally interrupted by the precious moments whose anticipation brought them to volunteer. Zoo administrators tame and reorder life in the wild in order to negotiate a triple mission: animal management, meeting family expectations for entertaining outings, and educating the public. Throughout, the institution simultaneously acknowledges and dishonors Darwin: animals “in nature” are ontologically intertwined in environments that zoos exist to displace.

What is the “take away”? The author allies with no grand theory that claims to identify a power structure or class interest according to which everything make sense. And yet Grazian’s engagement with the zoo at once turns backward in the history of social thought to give new meaning to grand old theories, such as by conveying (to me in novel ways) the totemic theme in Durkheim’s religious work, even as he pushes forward the Big Truth that emerges from his series of research projects. The reader becomes capable of hearing the quiet murmur of organized chaos that is the beating heart of the zoo, even as it also throbs at the center and, assisted by alcohol, more often erupts into visibility at the other sites of popular culture that Grazian has studied. The pursuit of authenticity—“wild” animal life in the zoo, “original” music in Blues Clubs, the encounter with libidinal energies in primordial state that is offered by the beckoning of a city’s night life—becomes understandable to the sociological reader as a
way people respond to their dim awareness of the outwardly disciplined but privately inconsistent mash ups of subjectivities that make up contemporary social life.

Through Grazian's studies, we come to suspect that the pursuit of authenticity is made marketable as the upshot of a vague, mass awareness that all major institutions are artificial shells obscuring the incompatible versions of reality lived by owners, donors, stockholders, managers and employees, political constituencies, government overseers, culture commentators, patrons, clients or customers. In order to justify political independence and get economic resources, the zoo, like all institutions, voices a polyphonal version of what it is about, which makes inaudible the cacophony of perspectives that routinely sustains it. Instead of undermining each other, the integrated profession of institutional mission by zoo officials and the implicitly conflicting meanings of the place to those who use it on a daily basis produce a tension which elicits an ever greater market for the pursuit of Authenticity. The patron goes to the zoo to experience nature and encounters social life organized so conventionally that what is taken away is usually little more than a light memory fragment. In some moments, visitors dimly appreciate how, like the animals who live in the zoo, their experience has been confined, which sparks a flicker of desire to know something essential that has remained beyond. Substituting the pursuit of timeless knowledge for the pursuit of pristine nature in the wild, much the same could be said of the college experience.

Toward the end of this book, Grazian reviews conflicts over the evolving mission of zoos. He depicts a growing battle between a totem-sensitive public that is increasingly critical of animal captivity-aided by African-American history and anthropomorphic entertainment culture, caged animals have become too reminiscent of human slavery--and supporters who advocate the zoo’s contributions to preservation, education for conservation, and rescue. When he delivers his policy recommendations--especially, to show fewer species--they are underwritten by his overall grasp of diverse subjective experiences. By carrying to perfection the analysis of an institution as a "collective act," as called for by
Everett Hughes and as demonstrated by generations of his best students, Grazian builds an authority that probably will be onerously taxed.