

**James K. Rowe**, *Radical Mindfulness: Why Transforming Fear of Death is Politically Vital*, New York: Routledge, 2024. ISBN 9781032523361 (paper); ISBN 9781032523378 (cloth); ISBN 9781003406181 (ebook)

The tradition of radical geography has long been concerned with how power and oppression operate in different spatial and temporal contexts. Yet, despite this central concern, the question of “*why* domination?” has received relatively scant attention. Granted, radical geographers and critical theorists of all stripes point to dominant structures such as capitalism, patriarchy, or white supremacy as root causes of oppression, and critical scholars provide detailed accounts of how these structures emerged historically and how they operate today. But what is often missing in response to these *how* questions is an account of the *why* questions: why do these oppressive structures emerge in the first place? Why have they become so pervasive and proven so stubbornly persistent? Why would cooperation, playfulness, or care not be the primary impulse that structures social relations rather than the dynamics of domination and subjugation? What explains the *will to dominate* which underpins prevailing structures of violence and injustice?

In *Radical Mindfulness*, James K. Rowe makes the convincing case that an unresolved fear of death is a common driver underlying diverse forms of “supremacist social relations”, be they white supremacy, male supremacy, human supremacy, or “other dominative social relations” (p.6). Rowe argues that the existential trepidation over one’s own finitude compels people to control and dominate others as a way of compensating for their powerlessness in the face of their own mortality. Although death is a universal condition of human existence, Rowe stresses that different cultural traditions have different ways of understanding and orienting themselves towards death. There is something particular about the way that the dominant cultures of Euro-American societies treat death which lends to social relations characterized by hierarchy and mastery. He writes, “If you’re part of a culture that figures death as a domineering master, then perhaps you will be hungrier for fantasies of supremacy that compensate for the belittlement felt before the natural given?” (p.9). In a culture that remains unwilling to accept the impermanence of our being, power over others offers a semblance of control over one’s own earthly conditions.

Thinking with an impressive range of theorists spanning diverse intellectual and cultural traditions, Rowe demonstrates that many cultures offer tools for “metabolizing” or soothing the death fear, and that doing so cultivates an orientation towards the world characterized by greater “openness and nondefensiveness” (p.9). After introducing the central arguments of the book in Chapters 1 and 2, the subsequent core chapters draw on teachings from Black radical, Buddhist feminist, and Indigenous intellectual traditions to illustrate how these approaches provide resources for managing existential anxieties in ways that counter the impulse to dominate. For instance, Chapter 3 explores the thought of James Baldwin, who, Rowe tells us, looked to Black cultural forms such as blues and jazz music to find a more “honest reckoning with the existential reality of finitude” and a “willingness to face reality, no matter how brutal”. Chapter 4 foregrounds the work of Haudenosaunee author John Mohawk, emphasizing how Indigenous practices of gratitude for the abundance of earthly life stand in marked contrast to Euro-American cultural tendencies to see nature as a constraint on human freedom. Chapter 5 (co-authored by Darcy Matthews) discusses how Coast Salish funerary practices “help transform death from a ‘scary other’ into a fundamental part of a trustworthy and regenerative cosmos”, thereby supporting “nonsupremacist relations with the more-than-human world” (p.105). Chapter 6 then examines the writings of Buddhist feminists Rita Gross and Hsiao-Lan Hu, who maintain that Buddhist mindfulness practices must be accompanied by political mobilization aimed at transforming both the existential and structural drivers of injustice.

To embrace our finitude, Rowe contends, does not imply that we should roll over and passively accept our fate. On the contrary, transforming the death fear requires collective action targeting the structural underpinnings of supremacist relations—this is what distinguishes “radical mindfulness” from other more individualistic pursuits. Just as Rowe is aware of the pitfalls of mind-body practices that emphasize personal change to the neglect of collective action, he is likewise cognisant of the way capitalist firms have recently adopted mindfulness practice in their efforts to augment workplace productivity. These forms of “corporate mindfulness”, which sever the practice from its Buddhist origins, are contrary to the radical mindfulness for which Rowe advocates insofar as they remain “actively inattentive” to the structural drivers of domination (p.13).

Given that radical mindfulness entails a collective endeavour to transform both the death fear and the structural manifestations of oppression, Rowe calls for an embedding of mind-body practices into activist mobilizing. “On their own, ... [mindfulness] strategies are not enough”, Rowe writes; “but integrated into social movements that are combatting structural injustices, mind-body practices can transform embodied fears that feed endless fuel to supremacist ideologies” (p.10). Indeed, he already sees this work happening on the ground in spaces as diverse as Occupy Wall Street and the Unist’ot’en camp on Wet’suwet’en territory and believes that there are benefits to these practices being embraced more widely by social and environmental justice organizers. Incorporating mindfulness practices can help frontline movements ensure that they do not inadvertently reproduce forms of domination and injustice themselves, thereby allowing these movements to prefigure more just and equitable futures. “Until existential fear is taken seriously as a fuel source for supremacist social relations, social injustice will endure”, he argues (p.11).

Although *Radical Mindfulness* is written as a work of political theory, one of the great attributes of the book is the ease with which Rowe breaks free of the Western canon that has long limited critical theorizing. The book will thus be of great interest to radical geographers committed to decolonizing our own discipline. Its revolutionary and transformative thrust, and its attention to structures of domination, also align with radical geography’s political commitments. But this is a book which offers more than just a critique of prevailing structures—it is a work of movement-oriented research which provides a powerful affirmative vision of what non-dominating worlds might look like, while pointing to a set of practical tools and resources that might help to bring those worlds into being.

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