

Example of sociology critical thinking

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“ National Geographic as our Sunglasses to the World: A Distorted Look at Reality:” A Critique

Sociologist Tami Miller, in his article “ National Geographic as our Sunglasses to the World: A Distorted Look at Reality,” presents a critical review of Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins’ research analysis of the National Geographic magazine. He said that the two authors’ research finding about the world-renown “ capitalist” organization has a “ hidden racist” perspective. It portrays photographs of foreign, exotic cultures (e. g., ritual behavior, colorful symbolic dress, etc.). Miller even asked why “ the National Geographic decides to pick certain photographs over others.”

I am ambivalent and do not want to toy with the idea that Miller’s answer to the above question is the claim that Westerners may unintentionally look down, marginalize and/or dominate non-Western people. It is a fact that there was a history of racism against black and other people in the US; however, this 21st century, even if Westerners are unfamiliar with the reasoning behind the actions of the people photographed and think that non-Westerners seem to have backward and even irrational behavior, those are realities of our present world we live in. We cannot gainsay the fact that those realities do exist to inform us.

Further, even when Miller pointed out that the authoritative magazine makes and distributes scientific knowledge, although its writers are not scientists, it does it due to “ scientific merit” or “ positive image” of the photos and its non-politicized, but controversial captions, because that is exactly how capitalist mindset works. Besides, that is actually, what a capitalist organization is – to cater to the privileged members of society. Thus, I agree

with Miller such that “ what does sell is all things exotic.” Concerning the motivation behind the magazine’s disclaimer as a scientific journal in that it does not have to adhere to any scientific methods or regulations as it researchers, writers and photographer depicts diverse non-Western cultures, I think there is nothing we can do about that.

There is, however, another point worthy of consideration. Part of Miller’s review is that the magazine intentionally put photos side by side in a subtle manner to show how the Western culture is a culturally evolving and progressive culture, in contrast to the rest of the cultures across the world. Hence, Westerners might unintentionally and then ultimately compare themselves as superior people than the rest. That is exactly what America is in the sight of the world – it is the land of the free, land of opportunity, and the only superpower today. Hence, even if Westerners find colored people’s traditional way as interesting, feel superior, and do not want to imagine living like non-Westerners with such cultures, there is no malice to that. It does not necessarily follow that Westerners are racists, except on some case-to-case bases.

I disagree with Miller when he said that since the National Geographic generally research on cultural differences, what is being presented is the “ us” in one culture and the “ other” in another culture. I believe there is no better magazine where such portrayals appear. Although it may be partly true that the Western culture is changing, modern and forward moving whereas non-Western cultures are unchanging, pre-modern and backward moving, this is not always the case in all aspects of a nation’s development. True that the West progresses materially because it wants results, proofs,

and progress using science as its tool while the non-West cling to their tradition without even much thought about progress in the real world. Nevertheless, that does not mean that everything that is foreign to the Westerners is illogical as an explanation for social outcomes.

What I admired about Miller is when he countered the idea that some of the previous assumptions concerning the National Geographic's portrayal of cultures regarding Westerners' racial prejudice as not ungrounded due to the fact that cultural evolution occurs hitherto. The West, accordingly, is actually offering guidance and support for the 'colored people' or non-Westerners to keep up with them.

Works Cited

Miller, Tami. National Geographic as our Sunglasses to the World: A Distorted Look at Reality. 2001. Humboldt State University: A California State University Campus. Web. 10 April 2013. .