

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Joana Breidenbach, Pál Nyíri. *Seeing Culture Everywhere, from Genocide to Consumer Habits.* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009. xi + 416 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-295-98950-1.



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In *Seeing Culture Everywhere*, Pál Nyíri and Joana Breidenbach present a well-argued discussion about the relevance of culture in society today. They argue that culture is often seen as static and unchanging, locked within particular borders. This “container view” of culture is commonly used in today’s society to explain everything from honor killings to genocide, and from consumer habits to intercultural communication in companies. In their words, “culture—or rather, cultural difference—is now held to be the main explanation for the way the human world functions” (p. 9).

The introduction starts with three interesting stories of people of different backgrounds caught up in the cultural wave: a Muslim man in Great Britain, a Bolivian woman working in a marketplace selling textiles to foreigners, and a Western businessman in Shanghai. These stories present diverse views of how culture is engrained in everyday life, and they show that culture matters in explanations of how others behave. Nyíri and Breidenbach use these cases in an innovative way to introduce the main themes of their book.

The first chapter covers Samuel Huntington’s arguments in his *The Clash of Civilizations* (1996) and the impact that his book has had on culture, from politics to

consumerism. Nyíri and Breidenbach focus on the effects that this “clash of civilizations” has on politics and address states’ views of terrorism and international security. Using examples from the recent past, such as the protests against the cartoons of Mohammed published in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*, they examine how the “clash of civilizations” can be perceived to be real; they counter this assessment, however, by explaining that Huntington makes quite a few assumptions about culture that are inaccurate and do not account for either cultural change or diversity.

Chapter 2 addresses culture in development institutions and discourse, examining two extremes of a debate over culture: the view that holds culture either as an obstacle to development and the view that holds development as an obstacle to maintaining culture (and as a tool of Western hegemony). Here, they describe instances where development has worked to displace large groups of people, such as the creation of the Kariba Dam in Zambia, as well examples where development was in the interest of locals, such as the building of roads in a Tibetan area of Yunnan Province. Nyíri and Breidenbach ask “whose culture are we, in the end, supposed to protect? That of the village, the ethnic group, the province, or the nation? How much change can occur before tradi-

tion ends? What is the price of maintaining tradition to locals, prevented from having flushing toilets, and outsiders, if they are hindered in their freedom to move where they can make a better living? But can higher incomes, better health, and more education be achieved in situations where a traditional lifestyle with the social networks that sustain it is suddenly disrupted?â (p. 90). They continue to say that in development, it is important that the local views of âthe good lifeâ are incorporated into the process, and that an assessment on local views be carried out by someone whom the development donor and anti-development nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) can trust.

The third chapter delves into the tendency of the media and politics to portray conflicts around the world as âethnicâ or âtribal.â This is part of what NyÅri and Breidenbach call the âethnicization of the world,â which involves everything from diasporas to invocation of ethnic or cultural symbolism and the articulation of cultural or ethnic identities for recognition of an indigenous group. The conflict in Rwanda, for example, in many media outlets, was portrayed as being a tribal conflict between the Hutu and the Tutsi groups. However, in reality, it was much more complex, with both sides garnering support from Western actors, and with a very complicated history that involved the actions of colonial governments as well as local groups. NyÅri and Breidenbach also analyze Yugoslavia, dissecting how it was portrayed and the realities behind it. This section helps to break down many of the stereotypes of âethnicâ conflicts, proving that there is a need to examine more closely the backgrounds to these conflicts that we see in the news, and that it is never as simple as a âtribalâ or âethnicâ conflict.

Chapter 4, âThe Challenge of Multiculturalism,â focuses on nation-statesâ use of culture as a governance tool or as an explanation for the behavior of those living within their borders. Examining how nation-states engage with the public, NyÅri and Breidenbach discuss current debates over the head scarf, female circumcision, and immigration, using examples of people caught in up these debates. They contrast the evolution of multiculturalism in the Americas and in Europe by showing how stereotypes of certain groups evolved within those borders, and how people either pushed the labels away or began acting in accordance with them. Furthermore, they discuss the shift from maintaining certain minority cultural rights in a countryâs institutions to extending those rights to the children of immigrants (for example, child brides). To integrate cultural difference in a multicultural society, they argue, the politics of recognition become

more significant; however, it is important to recognize that migrants come from a wide range of backgrounds, and that the assumption that migrants either hold the traditions of their native country or are rejects of that state is not accurate. Diversity needs to be accounted for, both within cultural minorities and within the larger state.

In the fifth chapter, NyÅri and Breidenbach examine indigenous rights and the question of property. They look at rights to intellectual and cultural property, as well as land title. They use examples from claims in which indigenous groups tried to claim an image or a sound that was theirs but had been borrowed by others for use in such areas as advertising or popular culture. In discussing cultural heritage, the authors question what happens to places deemed heritage sights, when the people are deprived of their choice to participate in it or not. For example, in Luang Prabang, Laos, a number of monks fell ill after participating in early morning almsgiving as per tradition. They tried to protest the continuance of the tradition, but the government made it clear that they must continue as this tradition is a tourist attraction.

Chapters 6 and 7 go hand in hand. Together, they address the rise of intercultural communication and critically examine the works of such people as Fons Trompenaars, Geert Hofstede, and Charles Hampden-Turner, considered experts in the field of cross-cultural communication. In these chapters NyÅri and Breidenbach discuss the business world. They maintain that corporations looking to expand often use intercultural communication tools as a method to help them succeed in international business, and that these tools, which look at culture through the container view, can also lead to failure.

From here, NyÅri and Breidenbach argue that âit is more helpful to see the dominant understandings of our world as a result of a number of specific intellectual and political trends that have led to todayâs culturalismâ (p. 342). Anytime that culture is put forth as an argument or explanation, they say, we must question who is making the claim, what their motivations are, and what position they hold in the culture in question. They recommend asking three questions that will enable professionals to âcritically interrogate projects and policiesâ (p. 343). First, what explicit and implicit statements about culture are involved, and about which groups? Second, what are the fault lines along which groups are defined and differentiated? And third, are you overlooking important differences within (or across) these groups?

Given that the title of the book includes the term

genocide. I expected more analysis of culture and genocide. The third chapter touches on this topic, but it is, unfortunately, the shortest chapter in the book. However, it does make up for its length in quality. For those interested in genocide studies, this book offers an alternative to the explanations often given of clashes around the world; it delves deeply into the politics behind the violence rather than portraying it as only an ethnic or cultural conflict. For those in the genocide prevention community, the book does not examine how culture, among other factors, features in mass civilian participation in genocide.[1] It looks more at public perception of culture and violence than the workings of violent clashes and the prevention of such conflicts. In a book covering such a wide range of topics, it is possible that there was just not enough space for covering this particular subtopic.

In the preface, NyÁri and Breidenbach state that their editors asked that the book be written for a general audience; they succeed in making it accessible to a wide readership. It is an excellent book that introduces the concept of "culture" without overwhelming the general reader with confusing definitions of the term, with which we in anthropology are all too familiar. At the same time, they

manage to integrate anthropological theory and scholarly works from a variety of disciplines. The book is well written and well argued, and I found it especially useful that each time the authors introduced a new topic or theory, they gave the history behind it. They balance theory with real-world examples and historical background; a balance that has helped make it accessible to wider audiences.

NyÁri and Breidenbach wrote this book to provide an alternative view to the intercultural approach, which, they point out, has its faults. Their work is an excellent introduction about the importance of culture, showing how culture matters and how to actively engage with it. It is a valuable contribution to the discourse on culture, and provides useful insights about engaging with culture in everyday life as well as in business and politics.

Note

[1]. For further reading on this topic, I recommend Alexander Laban Hinton's *Why Did They Kill: Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

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