

**Seeing Culture Everywhere: From Genocide to Consumer Habits. Joana Breidenbach and Pál Nyíri. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009, 416 pp.\***

Reviewed by Keith Hart

The authors of this well-written book tell how they were pushed by their editor into writing for a general audience. They have succeeded without sacrificing analytical rigor. They are a German freelance anthropologist, journalist and entrepreneur and a professor of anthropological history at the University of Amsterdam. They seek to describe and explain the ubiquity of culture as a discursive feature of our world. In six chapters they range from a global “clash of civilizations” through development and violent conflict to multicultural states, indigenous cultures, and “cultural competence” at the interpersonal level. An introduction identifies the topic and substantial conclusions make some recommendations for how anthropologists can promote ethnographic method while being skeptical about current uses of the culture concept.

The authors make many intelligent commentaries and their organization of the material is admirable. If the book fails to come up with a clear-cut diagnosis of culture-mania, this is probably because they lack a social theory taken from outside cultural anthropology itself. To the extent that an anthropology based on ethnography is complicit in the problem under study, our discipline can be claimed to be a major cause of its contemporary efflorescence.

Possibly too much space is taken up challenging the oversimplified thesis of Samuel Huntington; but the incubation of this book was during the height of Bush’s “war on terror,” so no doubt this was a justification. The following chapter revisits the Weberian focus on the role of culture in development that was dominant in the early decades of the Cold War. The tone is generally upbeat and we are spared the more pessimistic commentaries of the post-structuralist and post-development critics. But there is no discernible theory of development here. The chapter on violence does not spare us the horrors of Bosnia, Rwanda and Iraq. But again conventional representations of these conflicts as “ethnic” are inadequately criticized. What made the Serbs and the Hutus imagine that a “final solution” was possible? Not “culture,” after centuries of tense cohabitation, for sure. The Serbs had all the planes, tanks and heavy artillery; and the Hutus a monopoly of communications and the main public offices, as well as French support. Anthropologists made a lame critique of the cultural interpretations made by the western media at the time and this book, with the advantage of hindsight, is not much more penetrating.

The chapter on multiculturalism is quite comprehensive without adding much to what we know already about the contradiction between citizenship and identity politics. I am reminded of British liberal imperialism which was based on the assumption “Let them have their little

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cultures as long as we are in charge.” The power of Empire came in part from control of universal knowledge in the form of natural science and economics. Their latter-day successors now suffer cultural intransigence at home and the criticisms of French intellectuals like Bruno Latour? The plight of indigenous cultures is another hot potato where, in my view, most anthropologists have taken the wrong side in the intellectual property wars. But here again Breidenbach and Nyíri offer a reasonable summary of the “who owns native culture” debate, while relying quite heavily on the work of Michael F. Brown. The chapter on “inter-cultural communications” (IC to aficionados) was an eye-opener to this reader, revealing a whole industry, with the usual roster of overpaid gurus peddling blatantly inadequate shortcuts to understanding cultural difference. The story would be hilarious if it did not underline how far our bureaucracies have fallen from the time when social citizenship was a serious concern.

The authors conclude with a list of points that they hope will distance them from the more faddish aspects of culture-mania. Culture should not be seen as belonging to bounded, homogeneous units. Nor is it unchanging. It is a mistake to imagine that whole cultures could be in conflict with each other or that mixing them up can be dangerous. Uncritical celebration of cultural difference is equally to be avoided. The tendency of neoliberalism to govern through overdrawn stereotypes of “community” is seen as being a negative development. Cultural pigeonholing is out, cultural creativity at a highly differentiated level is in. We are finally told that ethnography is still a viable method, as long as it is linked to universal notions of “human development” as argued by the likes of Amartya Sen.

The world since 1945 has seen a revolution and a counter-revolution. The first, lasting what the French call *les trente glorieuses* until the watershed of the 1970s, saw the dismantling of European empire and a sustained commitment of the industrial democracies to expand the public services and disposable income available to ordinary working people. The second, usually identified as the neoliberal era, was a sustained attempt to reverse these social democratic gains in the interest of capital accumulation, the deregulation of political controls of markets, and the invasion of commerce into public and domestic life. This may or may not be facing its own terminal crisis now. A period of strong states and economic expansion was succeeded by one of weakened states and increased inequality without the same rate of development.

The leading capitalist countries have undergone significant demoralization as a result. It is commonplace to point out the negative consequences of individualization for all forms of social solidarity. But the revival of the fortunes of indigenous and many other cultural minorities in recent decades is not just to be explained by their own efforts of self-mobilization, important as these are. The mission that sustained the leading members of western civilization has been seriously undermined by neoliberalism. How many times do people have to hear that their states are the cause of all their woes before they lose heart and passively make concessions to more motivated groups? If we are serious about understanding the culture boom, we must take a historical view of the last half-century or more and be open to social theories that once underpinned the more progressive currents of anthropology, but sadly no longer do.

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