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Book Review

Brekhus, Wayne H. 2015. *Culture and Cognition: Patterns in the Social Construction of Reality*. Cambridge: Polity Press

Cognitive sociology is an approach already well-established in Western social science, but in Poland, it is not distinguished as a separate sub-field of social inquiry. This is not to say that problems and questions pertaining to “culture and cognition” are not explored by Polish scholars. Quite the opposite—there is a considerable body of research on cognitive aspects of social processes, but it is usually carried out under different labels, such as “discourse analysis,” “sociology of the media,” “research on social stereotypes,” and the like. A narrow research specialization, so pervasive in today’s academia, may prevent many scholars from realizing that there are some general features in cognitive phenomena across different social settings and that many valuable insights can be drawn from neighboring fields of research and applied to one’s own. The more useful are books like Wayne H. Brekhus’s *Culture and Cognition: Patterns in the Social Construction of Reality*, published in 2015 by Polity Press. What Brekhus aims at is precisely gathering diverse manifestations of cognitive sociology on a conceptual common ground and proving that they illuminate each other in many respects, even though this approach is far from reaching theoretical consensus, and its many internal debates are heated and unresolved.

Already at the outset, cognitive sociology proves to be a family of closely related concerns and problems rather than a unified theoretical stance. In the Introduction to the book, Brekhus outlines three general approaches to cognitive phenomena in social science, each one with its own founding father and a subset of distinct assumptions and research questions. The cultural approach rests primarily on Emile Durkheim’s concept of collective representations as an emergent force shaping individual cognition. Contemporary adherents of this Durkheimian approach are, among others, Eviatar Zerubavel and Jeffrey Alexander with his “strong culture” program. The second social approach draws extensively on symbolic interactionism, and especially on Erving Goffman’s analyses of how local settings and group processes determine individual perception and attention. Finally, the third approach is the most individualistic of all three and focuses on “individual cognitive processing of embodied experience” (p. 6). Here, the founding father is Pierre Bourdieu with his notion of habitus, but this approach is also based on cognitive neuroscience and developmental psychology. In the following section, however, Brekhus observes that this tripartite distinction does not do justice to the diversity in the field of cognitive social research. Therefore, he outlines five more specific “tra-

ditions,” three of which are mostly concurrent with the “approaches,” but additionally, Eviatar Zerubavel’s social mindscapes tradition and Ann Swidler’s cultural toolkit tradition are distinguished.

One might expect that the following chapters in the book would be organized according to the theoretical distinction outlined above, each chapter devoted to a specific approach or tradition. Brekhus, however, takes a different path—he chooses to focus on empirical subfields in cognitive social research, cutting across the theoretical perspectives. Thus, subsequent chapters cover topics of perception, attention, and framing (Chapter 1), classification, categorization, and boundary work (Chapter 2), meaning-making, metaphor, and frames of meaning (Chapter 3), identity construction (Chapter 4), and finally, memory and time (Chapter 5). Only in the Conclusion to the book does Brekhus return to theoretical issues, discussing an overarching controversy between the socio-cultural and neuropsychological models of cognition.

Chapter 1—“Perception, Attention and Framing”—deals with fundamental cognitive processes underlying much of the book’s content. Brekhus discusses basic rules by which people perceive some objects, qualities, and phenomena as important and worthy of their attention while ignoring or downplaying others. These processes may be analyzed in terms of the relationship between social figure and ground (based on the Gestalt theory of perception) or the socially marked and unmarked (a distinction borrowed from linguistic structuralists such as Trubetzkoy and Jakobson). This model is extensively employed by Brekhus to demonstrate how certain social groups (women, blacks, sexual and cultural minorities, etc.) are assigned the

status of “socially specialized” (or socially marked) against the “socially generic” (or socially unmarked) dominant groups. Another important distinction introduced in the chapter is between automatic and deliberate cognition. The former is a default mode of cognition in everyday situations based on habit and routine, while the latter is mostly activated when the taken-for-grantedness of everyday life is called into question (for example, when a socially marked element is introduced into an unmarked environment). Finally, Brekhus shows how different “cultures of attention” (at the macro-social or institutional level) determine perceptions of risk, for example, enhancing attention paid to “unusual” and grave dangers at the expense of usual and minor ones.

Chapter 2—“Classification, Categorization and Boundary Work”—addresses the question of how people “establish similarities and differences between phenomena” (p. 60). Brekhus draws on anthropological works by Durkheim, Mauss, van Gennep, Turner, and Douglas and Zerubavel’s sociological theory to show how discontinuities or “discrete breaks” may be introduced in continuous features, such as racial characteristics. Constructing “race” is discussed in a comparative perspective, for example, in the United States, the “one drop rule” was adopted by which people with black ancestors in whatever proportion were considered “black,” while in South Africa, the race categorization system included the separate “colored” category for all interracial children. Furthermore, various characteristics may enhance each other as category-markers (for example, being unemployed and having residence in inner city areas increases the likelihood of being categorized as a black person). The final part of the chapter deals with objects, individuals, and groups which do

not belong to any of the established categories, transcend them, or move between them. Here, the concept of liminality developed by van Gennep and Turner and the notions of purity and contamination analyzed by Douglas are applied to the social perception of various cross-category groups, such as strangers, commuters, and trans-gender persons.

Chapter 3—“Meaning-Making, Metaphor, and Frames of Meaning”—brings a discussion of semantic devices employed to make sense of various social phenomena. This chapter is the most difficult to summarize as it covers a vast array of empirical research fields with a very general conceptual axis (even more so than in the rest of the book). Two central concepts—“metaphor” and “frame”—are mostly based on the works of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, Gabriel Ignatow, and Erving Goffman. However, both are only sketched in theoretical terms, and Brekhus quickly turns to demonstrate how specific metaphors and frames structure cultural experience of various groups and audiences. The general notion of “cultural frames of meaning” is applied to different aspects of money economy—wealth itself (difference between “old money” and “new money”), consumer goods, mortgages and tax policy. A more thorough consideration is paid to spatial metaphors (“life is a journey,” “moral growth is physical growth”) and nature/culture metaphors, where social phenomena are represented in natural terms (“immigration is a flood”) or the other way round—nature is “humanized” (ants depicted as “soldiers” and “colonizers”). Moving beyond metaphor, Brekhus discusses analogy as a more narrative device of framing. As an example, he cites Jens Rygdren’s work on how analogies are drawn between present and past ethnic conflicts. Contrasting example is Jeffrey Alexander’s analysis of

the social process whereby the Nazi mass murder of the Jews, originally conceived of, by analogy, as a war crime, after some time was singled out and renamed as “Holocaust” to emphasize its incomparability with other war atrocities.

Chapter 4—“Identity Construction: Identity Authenticity, Multidimensionality, and Mobility”—seems to be the closest to Brekhus’s own research interests. Constructing individual and social identities is described as a form of “boundary work”—defining oneself against a “marked other.” Brekhus shows people “craft symbolic boundaries against others,” as evidenced by cultural omnivores with high cultural capital or different kinds of abstainers (vegans, straight-edge persons, members of the voluntary simplicity movement, and the like). Subsequently, three basic dimensions of identity—its authenticity, multidimensionality, and mobility—are discussed. Brekhus draws on his own research on gay communities to show how the recognition of an authentic gay identity is differently accorded depending on its duration (how much of an individual’s time is devoted to performing the identity) and its density (how adequate are the performances). The question of identity multidimensionality pertains to the fact that nowadays most people maintain many intersecting identities and often have to put an extra effort in retaining the sense of a coherent self. Identity mobility, in turn, is the phenomenon of “code-switching” by people who are able—and often willing to—perform different identities in various spatial and temporal contexts. These may be “nocturnal selves” of young urbanites, “vacation selves” of tourists, et cetera.

Chapter 5—“Memory and Time”—focuses on the temporal dimension of cognitive processes. As various re-

searchers cited by Brekhus have demonstrated, memorizing and forgetting past events—and also meanings attributed to these memories—is strongly dependent on many social factors, including one’s generation, race, and ethnicity. This is convincingly shown in studies on the collective memories of World War II, the Vietnam War, and the civil rights movement, remembered more vividly and in a more individualized manner by those who were in their teens and early twenties when these events occurred. Other studies prove that in mutually conflicted race or ethnic groups, the memories of negative encounters and events (cases of racial discrimination, ethnic cleansing, etc.) often crowd out the memories of more peaceful moments of coexistence. In the following part of the chapter, focus is shifted to timing frames and time sequencing—social rules by which some narratives (e.g., talk shows) are temporally organized to fit in a certain moral framework. Finally, Brekhus discusses ways of “doing time” or “sociotemporal orders”—forms of structuring and experiencing time by members of different occupational groups, such as truck drivers or kitchen workers, and subcultural groups, such as inmates or queers.

In Conclusion, Brekhus returns to the theoretical level of cognitive sociology to review the controversy between the “traditional” cultural approaches to cognition and the “new” embodied/neuropsychological approach. Proponents of the latter—Omar Lizardo and Stephen Vaisey, among others—claim that the culturalists overemphasize the role played by conscious, discursive cognitive processes, and thus also the weight of socialization and internalization as the—allegedly—principal forces shaping individual cognition. This criticism has been metaphorically expressed in the figure of a rider on the back of an el-

ephant, where the rider—symbolizing conscious cognitive processes—for the most part only “pretends to be in control” of the elephant (automatic cognitive processes or “practical consciousness”). The culturalists, such as Ann Swidler, respond to the criticism by stressing that “cultural meanings are organized and brought to bear at the collective and social, not the individual level” (p. 176). From this it follows that whatever are the mechanics of individual cognition and the balance of power between conscious and unconscious processes, the content of individual beliefs and intuitions cannot be derived from neurological facts only. Other scholars, such as Alison Pugh, criticize the embodied neuroscience for overstating the divide between the conscious and the unconscious cognitive processes, whereas in reality, the two are in a constant interplay. In concluding part of the chapter, Brekhus outlines three research areas in which the cognitive approach may be of particular importance to social scientists, namely, the theory of social action, studies of power and social inequalities, and research focused on detecting general social patterns across many specific cases and contexts.

The decision to withhold from analyzing subtle theoretical differences and focus instead on empirical richness of cognitive sociology pays off in many ways, but it is also one of the book’s drawbacks. It is quite clear that *Culture and Cognition* was meant rather as an introductory reading for all those who would like to get (more) acquainted with the cutting-edge research in the field and develop an accurate picture of how far this approach may lead. In this respect, the book does its job marvelously—one can hardly think of any important topic which has not been covered here (perhaps apart from the question of causality and its

social construction). Also, Brekhus does not limit his discussion to the “big names,” such as Goffman, Alexander, or Zerubavel, but introduces many exemplary pieces of research carried out by less known scholars. However, this richness comes with a price. Clustering so many references, often following each other in a kaleidoscopic manner (few of them are paid more attention than a paragraph or two), may sometimes overwhelm the reader, especially when he or she is not so familiar with cognitive sociology. The book reads much better when Brekhus takes a longer (and closer) look at some particular study and considers its deeper implications. Moreover, subsequent examples of cognitive social research are often introduced without explaining how they relate to each other (if at all). Thus, the book sometimes turns into an enumeration of excellent pieces of scholarship, Swedish buffet style, but an underlying narrative is wanted.

As I have already mentioned, such structure is probably understandable and (to some extent) defensible, if we keep in mind the purpose of the book. But, another objection is more difficult to refute on purely technical grounds. Cognitive sociology, as Brekhus depicts it, seems closely bound to the traditional understanding of sociology as a science of modern or industrial societies. Even though two of three founding fathers of cognitive social science (Durkheim and Bourdieu) were anthropologists at some stages of their careers, and some of their most valuable insights were drawn from studying pre-modern societies, social or cultural anthropology is largely excluded from the picture. Of course, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with this, as long as one assumes that subject matters of cognitive sociology and cognitive anthropology are in fact separate, and discov-

eries made in both subdisciplines do not really pertain to each other. This assumption may seem quite reasonable in some empirical areas (such as framing news in contemporary mass-media), but it is just as reasonable to maintain that all cognitive processes in humans—be they hunter-gatherers, horticulturalists, or television viewers—are to some extent similar, and thus cognitive sociologists and anthropologists have many common topics to talk about.

Especially in the neurologically-informed tradition it is quite impossible to delineate sociology from anthropology, as some scientists (Barkow, Cosmides, and Tooby 1992; Boyer 2001) claim that the human brain and its cognitive capacities have not changed significantly since the Pleistocene, and whatever “modern” phenomena we study, they are at least partially based on these fundamental structures. But also in other research traditions, anthropological data might prove quite useful to make a point. This is probably most evident in the Durkheimian tradition, and here Brekhus indeed makes some excursions into the territory of cultural anthropology. As I have already mentioned, they are mostly concentrated in Chapter 2, where influential works of van Gennep, Turner, and Douglas are discussed. [However, any reference to Marshall Sahlins (1985) and his account of how cultural structures shape individual thought is sorely missing.] Other chapters have much less anthropological content, even where it could easily complement more “sociological” observations. To name just a few: the discussion of metaphors in Chapter 3, where nature/culture metaphors are considered, does not acknowledge many contributions made by anthropological structuralists, such as Claude Lévi-Strauss (1991) or Edmund Leach (1976). In Chapter 4, the analysis of

identity mobility could be further illustrated with Tom Boellstorff’s *Coming of Age in Second Life* (2008)—an anthropological study of “persona-playing” in one of the (once) most popular virtual worlds on the Internet. Finally, the considerations of memory and time in Chapter 5 would benefit from a brief glance on the classical studies by Edward Evans-Pritchard (1940) or Benjamin Whorf (Whorf, Carroll 1956).

Quite ironically, on the second page of the book, Brekhus mentions the “cultural bias” inherent in many experiments in cognitive psychology where the results obtained from specific populations (mostly Westerners, foremostly Americans, quite probably psychology undergraduates) are taken to bear on humans as such. Cultural variance in such experiments is one of principal arguments for the existence of

a comparative, intercultural cognitive science, taking into account not only mental attributes, structures, and processes shared by all humans, but also the variety of socio-cultural forces at work, from local settings and group idiocultures to macro-scale discursive formations. Obviously, individual scholars may and will focus on different loci, not only in a metaphorical, but also geographical sense. However, there remains the task of integrating knowledge from all these settings, and to this end a more interdisciplinary approach is needed. Therefore, I would recommend books like Brekhus’s *Culture and Cognition* not only to sociologists, but also to anthropologists, and the other way round: sociologists interested in “culture and cognition” would greatly benefit from incorporating anthropological knowledge into their modern-oriented theory and research.

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