

Cultural Turns and Trans/National Studies

BACHMANN-MEDICK, Doris – *Cultural Turns: New Orientations in the Study of Culture*. Trans. Adam Blauhut, Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2016. Pp. 302.

BACHMANN-MEDICK, Doris (ed.) – *The Trans/National Study of Culture. A Translational Perspective*, Berlin-Boston: De Gruyter, 2016. Pp. 271.

Both volumes under review share a common element: the relevance of anthropological studies in current cultural discourse and historical writing in particular. In her tour-de-force monograph *Cultural Turns: New Orientations in the Study of Culture (CT)*, Doris Bachmann-Medick offers a wide and well-informed overview of the most recent developments in cultural studies and reflects on the turns in that field since the early 1980s. Her edited collection—*The Trans/National Study of Culture (T/NSC)*—offers a variety of case studies exemplifying the variety of cultural studies. Before analysing these two volumes, I would mention the growing and pervasive role of anthropology after about 1980. Anthropological studies have deeply affected the historical disciplines of late, as Jeremy Popkin has stressed yet again.¹

Cultural Turns

Bachmann-Medick, a specialist in cultural and literary studies (*Literatur- und Kulturwissenschaften*) at the University of Giessen, is fully aware that anthropology became a leader in the social sciences, and her monograph charts the ways in which the interest in culture has changed the approach to social phenomena beyond the boundaries of academic discussion in the social sciences.

However, surprisingly, Bachmann-Medick is not explicit about how the various turns in cultural studies have affected the public understanding of and discourse on social events. More than she does, I would argue that anthropology has deeply transformed the perception of social in the last thirty years or so. Hollywood can give us an idea of how influential cultural anthropology has become. Denis Villeneuve's award-winning film *Arrival* (2016), based on a novel by Ted Chiang, recounts the story of a fleet of spaceships from a distant planet landing in various parts of the world. Parallel to other subplots, including the relativity of time dimensions, the movie features a major issue of twentieth-century anthropology, which the script conveniently updated for the post-*Star Trek* age. The encounter

1 Jeremy Popkin, *From Herodotus to H-Net*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 134-135

of different cultures and the process of creating communication between them *ex nihilo*—crucial for the linguist and the extraterrestrials (ETs) in *Arrival*, reminds me of anthropologist/linguist Edward Sapir's effort when he encountered Ishi, the only surviving speaker of the Yahi language, in the 1910s.

More broadly, the movie revisits the open question of how to focus on radically alien cultures. Like Sapir (and Franz Boas, and Margaret Mead, and so on) the leading actress achieves the fundamental objective of every form of anthropology—bridging the gap between groups that have to agree on basic pieces of linguistic information and then to understand each other in terms of culture. In *Arrival* she also saves the earth from a destructive clash between humans and ETs by returning to a founding value of modern anthropology, the secular faith in dialogue and mutual comprehension. The actress sums up Sapir's controversial stance as soon as she realizes she has entered a new dimension of time and knowledge: "There's this idea that immersing yourself in a foreign language can rewire your brain."² If you replace "a foreign language" with "a foreign culture," you are right in the middle of the set of questions that Bachmann-Medick raises. To what extent does the actress-linguist's success represent the undeniable resonance of anthropological studies? Bachmann-Medick does not explicitly ask this question, but the reader senses her skepticism about the real accomplishments of anthropology as a cornerstone of the humanities, despite her interest in it. *CT*'s straightforward chronological structure helps explain its ambivalence on the matter. There have been a number of turns in the cultural sciences. Each of them has claimed to inaugurate a new vision of crucial aspects of the humanities and to increase the understanding of social phenomena.

The author asks two questions at the start, and her answers shape the way she makes sense of an obviously complex debate. What makes a turn? How many of them can we list? She sees the development of the study of culture as the unfolding of a succession of seven turns that have renewed and shaken the discipline since the 1970s. Turns are shifts within the discipline (turns imply "a much more cautious, experimental and gradual manner [leading] to the breakthrough of new perspectives and approaches"; *CT*, p. 10), unlike abrupt "paradigm shifts" in Thomas Kuhn's sense, which their definition limits to the professional members of a scientific community. For Bachmann-Medick, turns nonetheless structure a narrative based on instability and fluidity and on the "stress of connectivity" (Caroline Bynum) that defines the humanities in general and historical studies in particular. The "crucial 'mega' turn—the linguistic turn" (*CT*, p. 21) has led generally in sequence to these seven turns: interpretive, performative, reflexive/literary, postcolonial, translational, spatial, and iconic/pictorial. The linguistic turn, according to Bachmann-Medick, has been the matrix of a radical reassessment of the vision of culture and of the way to conceptualize it. More than Richard Rorty, in many respects the initiator of the linguistic turn in the mid-1960s, it was Clifford Geertz who figures prominently in Bachmann-Medick's narrative. While she never acknowledges him as such, Geertz is the inspiring and pivotal figure

2 See James Gleick, "When They Came from Another World," *New York Review of Books*, Jan. 19, 2017

of her concept of cultural studies. Her understanding of a turn in anthropology reminds me of Geertz's autobiographical and deeply ironic recollection of endless proliferating new directions in anthropology since the 1960s.

For the next fifteen years or so, proposals for new directions in anthropological theory and method appeared almost by the month, one more clamorous than the next. Some, like French structuralism, had been around for a while but took on greater appeal as Claude Lévi-Strauss, its proprietor—founder, moved on from kinship studies to distributional analyses of symbolic forms.... Others, like 'sociobiology', 'cognitive anthropology', 'the ethnography of speaking', or 'cultural materialism', were stimulated, sometimes overstimulated, by advances in biology, information theory, semiotics, or ecology. There was neo-Marxism, neo-evolutionism, neo-functionalism, and neo-Durckheimianism. [...] What was lacking was any means of ordering them within a broadly accepted disciplinary frame or rationale, an encompassing paradigm. The sense that the field was breaking up into smaller and smaller, incommensurable fragments, that a primordial oneness was being lost in a swarm of fads and fashions, grew, producing cries, angry, desperate, or merely puzzled, for some sort of reunification.³

Geertz was caught in the maelstrom and later distanced himself from it, but he played a role in conjuring it up. He was the first to apply the metaphor of 'culture as text' to the actual analysis of social events and, as Bachmann-Medick stresses, to shift the focus to "interpretive cultural anthropology and a reevaluation of culture ... as a system of signs and symbols that was interpretable and engaged in self-interpretation itself" (*CT*, pp. 23-24). Interpretation was again the perspective that provided access to social facts by turning them into symbols. This move had indeed major consequences. Bachmann-Medick emphasizes the transformation of the literary genres involved in the study of culture: it markedly reduced the disciplinary boundaries. The "genre blurring" that Geertz mentioned in his 1980 essay (*CT*, pp. 43-47) has in fact become a distinctive feature of texts issuing from disciplines traditionally resistant to hybridization, such as history. "Genre blurring" defines the search of new writing styles for anthropologists: Geertz himself practised the literary analysis of the ethnographic writings of classic authors such as Malinowski, Lévi-Strauss, Evans-Pritchard, and Benedict.

One can hardly overestimate the impact of Geertz's own interpretive turn in the 1980s. As Bachmann-Medick mentions (*CT*, p. 22), the interpretive turn was one of the consequences of the linguistic turn that became fully visible for historians, on the theoretical level, in Hayden White's *Metahistory* (1973). As a matter of fact, Hayden White and Geertz asked a very similar question: "What does the ethnographer [the historian] do?" and gave the same answer: "He writes" (for Geertz; *CT*, p. 103). That answer revolutionized the function and orientation of intellectual activity. Historians and anthropologists regained their identity (and responsibility) as writers in their own right.

3 Clifford Geertz, "An Inconstant Profession", in (ed.) Fred Inglis, *Life among the Anthros and Other Essays*, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010), pp. 185-199, quotation pp. 194-195.

Similarities between White and Geertz were probably not really evident in the 1970s and 1980s but are clearer now with the benefit of hindsight. Both agreed in stressing that social reality is not accessible to ethnographers and historians directly: historians and anthropologists deal with texts, real and metaphorical, and have to break or disclose codes of emotion and action to move closer to the core of situations, rather than assuming that realities speak per se. While insisting on the impact the linguistic turn made through the later interpretive turn, Bachmann-Medick does not analyze how actual research felt and mediated this impact.

For historical investigation, Bachmann-Medick has written a succinct paragraph (*CT*, pp. 61-62) that does not do justice to the emergence of historical anthropology as a distinct sub-discipline and a model for other historical sub-disciplines. Robert Darnton reached global academic success, no matter how controversial, with his ethnographic interpretation of a variety of episodes taken from the French folklore and history of the *ancien régime* in the Great Cat Massacre.⁴ His collaboration with Geertz in a graduate seminar at Princeton University, however, was the culmination of a process converging with trends Geertz exemplified, rather than itself a new approach. Since the 1960s, seeing the “past as a foreign land” or “the world we lost” had become a legitimate and refreshing way for historians to gain access to a reality that had seemed radically “other” and necessitated a revision of the standard approach. Cultural anthropology was one of the disciplines that transformed history writing as it helped to free the past from present experience, doing away with the assumption that continuity is the cornerstone of any historical understanding and that the search for roots and origins and for similarities legitimizes historical research.

In roughly the same period as Darnton’s book appeared, more and equally successful history books represented the trend to the “othering”. Carlo Ginzburg’s *The Cheese and the Worms*, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie’s investigation of Montaignou, and Natalie Zemon Davis’s *The Return of Martin Guerre* were tips of an iceberg that had cultural anthropology, not necessarily in its Geertzian version, at its foundation.⁵

Bachmann-Medick is right to stress that the shift from every turn to the next has been a complex and nuanced process and that applications of the various turns to empirical research have made for different outcomes. A large part of this volume deals with the turns that followed from the interpretive turn. The analysis of the postcolonial and the translational turns seems to be particularly accurate and to cover a wide range of works and authors. The connection between postcolonial and global studies is indeed worth more attention than it has received so far: Bachmann-Medick considers the undeniable “signs of fatigue affecting” the postcolonial turn and seems to agree with Arif Dirlik’s argument that “the postcolonial turn is taking the same path as transnational capitalism” and needs

4 Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

5 Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-century Miller* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982); Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaignou, village occitan: de 1294 à 1324* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975); and Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983).

radical rethinking and reorienting (*CT*, p. 162). However, her preference for conceptual summaries of theoretical approaches over assessments of empirical works keeps her description quite abstract and leads her to be unnecessarily neutral when she compares contrasting approaches.

This becomes evident in the final “Outlook: Are the Cultural Turns Leading to a Turn in the Humanities and Study of Culture?” (*CT*, pp. 279-293). The religious, neuroscientific, and digital turns are likely to occur in cultural studies in the next few years: their respective natures mean their impact on the study of culture will be remarkable, but not positive *per se*. In the *History Manifesto*, David Armitage and Jo Guldi have examined how the digital turn is redefining the task and function of history writing.⁶ Before them, Daniel Lord Smail had ventured to apply the neuroscientific turn to the history (and transformation) of the brain-body system.⁷ Neither book is uncontroversial, but both offer empirical data and insights into relevant issues in cultural history, something that is largely missing in Bachmann-Medick’s book.

Trans/National Studies

The essays in *T/NSC* provide for the nitty-gritty details—biographical, emotional, experiential—that Bachmann-Medick considered incompatible with the scholarly detachment of *CT*. *T/NSC* covers a wide range of topics relating to the analysis of culture. While *CT* deals almost exclusively with Germany and the United States, *T/NSC* has a cosmopolitan focus, embracing—and not just reflecting on—non-Euro-American cultural realities. Bachmann-Medick’s remarks on the “(transnational) study of culture as translation studies” (*T/NSC*, p. 121) add a personal note to her accurate and matter-of-fact description of how, “in a world of interdependencies and interconnections, translation is increasingly liberated from the linguistic textual paradigm and recognized as an essential practice” (*CT*, p. 175)—the subject of part V of *CT*. The notion of ‘travelling concepts’ plays a crucial role in most contributions. As Middell emphasizes, it is a metaphor that suggests synchronicity as well as free and open-ended circulation (*T/NSC*, p. 137). In fact, on closer investigation, ‘travelling concepts’ (and the French ‘concepts nomades’) tested how watertight national borders were in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (and might become again in the post-Obama world we have just entered).⁸ They also show to what extent contingency, randomness, and individual decisions affect the circulation of concepts and ideas as well as of goods and capital. The powerful impact of subaltern studies—resistance studies based on Antonio Gramsci and Toni Negri, Edward Said’s orientalism, and gender studies, to name just a few travelling concepts—is a commonplace, perhaps a cliché. They gain new life and vibrancy when one evaluates them in terms of individual cases, as occurs in most contributions in *T/NSC*. Concepts that have been travelling through time offer additional interest, like the understanding of a foreign culture that a fifth-century bishop from Central Europe had to work out when negotiating with “the

6 David Armitage and Jo Guldi, *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

7 Daniel Lord Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain* (Berkeley: California University Press, 2008).

8 Olivier Christin (dir.), *Dictionnaire des concepts nomades en sciences humaines* (Paris: Métailié, 2010).

non-Roman neighbors” settled along “border areas and contact zones spanning hundreds of kilometers” (*T/NSC*, Lutter, pp. 160-161). Boris Buden describes a similar experience obliquely when he refers to the notion of the Balkans as a belated and basically constantly imperfect culture that in principle defies the conventional application of cultural studies, with their Western bias (*T/NSC*, pp. 171-180). Dipesh Chakrabarty stands out in this volume, critically revising the ideological baggage within the Western notion of culture in his work as well as in his life while harnessing the cognitive potential of the Western discourse on cultures (*T/NSC*, pp. 53-68).

Overall, *CT* and *T/NSC* complement each other surprisingly well. *CT* focuses on system-oriented approaches based on homogeneous turns and barely conceals an encyclopaedic ambition, while *T/NSC* is largely unsystematic, idiosyncratic, and sometimes contradictory. Both are serious contributions, well worth careful reading. Social historians in particular will find in them a perceptive discussion that clarifies the long-term theoretical foundations of the latest transformations in historical writing.

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