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Key Concepts for the Study of Culture. An Introduction. Ed. Vera Nünning, Philipp Löffler, Margit Peterfy (WVT Handbücher zum literatur- und kulturwissenschaftlichen Studium, 22). Trier: WVT, 2020. Pp. 374, 66 Abb. Kart. € 28.00.

This contribution to WVT's prominent series of study aids is presented simultaneously as a "handbook" and as an "introduction". It addresses "young researchers" who need assistance to "find their feet in a booming and highly promising field of study" (n.p. [p. v]). The book, which has emerged from a co-taught lecture at the University of Heidelberg, can be read as responding to the specific situatedness of cultural studies within German departments of Anglophone philology. The authors – Vera Nünning, Philipp Löffler and Margit Peterfy, with Corinna Assmann coming in as a co-author for two of the twelve chapters – usefully integrate American and British studies, but they refrain from addressing other English-speaking cultures. The "study of culture" – significantly, the term 'cultural studies' is largely avoided – comes to be presented not as a consolidated discipline but as an open project, a set of morphing dispositions which combines perspectives "ranging from cultural anthropology and cultural psychology to philosophy, sociology and postcolonial theory" (ibd.).

A chart (p. 38) visualizes the book's structure as a circular progression between various interconnected key concepts. The decision to prominently feature a chapter on "Cultural Ways of Worldmaking" (ch. 2) proves felicitous for the purposes of a student-oriented introduction. In the same light, the chapters on "Performance (Studies) and Performativity", on "Visual Studies and Culture", on "Material Culture and Intermediality" and on "Cultural Memory" also work particularly well, combining basic information and general readability with useful excursions into the philosophical foundations of and current re-orientations in cultural scholarship. Margit Peterfy's chapter on performance/performativity, for example, provides a firm theoretical grounding by discussing William James, Kenneth Burke, Austin and Derrida along with Butler and Bourdieu while also plausibly pointing out the "liberating" potential of the terminology (p. 153).

A wealth of diagrams and illustrations (often in colour) and the highlighting of key phrases in bold print help readers to find their bearings. Another prime asset is the consistent application of theoretical concepts to historical examples. Referring to American and British cultural history from the sixteenth century to the present moment, many of these concretizations (on the representation of the 'Old South' and slavery in American discourses, on the power of historiographical labelling or on the 18th-century cult of sensibility, to mention a few examples) prove illuminating.

Among the book's problematical aspects is the notion of 'culture' introduced in an opening chapter by Vera Nünning. Rather than positioning this most tricky of terms as an abstraction that enables specific perspectives on social practices, the chapter strives for

an experiential concreteness that demands differentialism. The tendency to approach ‘culture’ in contrastive plural formations is manifest in subheadings such as “Major Characteristics of Cultures” or “Basic Differences between Cultures”. Sometimes, this approach results in a mixture of risky comparison and careful qualification: “Though one has to be wary of over-generalizations”, it is argued, “there seem to be cultures that are more individualist while others are more collectivist, with a relatively high degree of individualism characterizing many Western cultures, and a relatively high degree of collectivism defining many Eastern cultures” (p. 32). Such assumptions are certainly not totally wrong. However, they are evidently not precisely correct either. One might suggest that the task of cultural scholarship is in critically opening up differentialist stereotypes rather than in cautiously deliberating their partial validity.

Nearly all the way through, the book combines the presentation of standard concepts with the exploration of new trends or even with the tacit postulation of fundamental reorientations. While this is always thought-provoking, the students addressed by *Key Concepts* will probably have difficulty in telling conventional conceptualizations from interesting actualizations and both from a couple of bold turns. One such turn is the attempt of (re)establishing ‘civilization’ as a key concept (ch. 4). Drawing on Norbert Elias’ seminal *The Civilizing Process* (1939), Philipp Löffler pleads for “hold[ing] on to the term [of civilization] while still exposing its problematic ideological thrust” (p. 134). On these grounds, he attempts a reparative reading of imperialist progressivism, arguing that there is an “intricate interplay” between old “hierarchical understandings of civilization” and the “pluralistic understandings of civilizational progress” that can allegedly be “associated with more contemporary ideas of multiculturalism and diversity” (p. 120). Such operations are apparently designed to emancipate the *study of culture* from the Marxist legacies reverberating in *cultural studies*. Thus, Elias is recommended for “helping us circumvent some of the impasses that poststructuralist and materialist theories of culture were unable to overcome” (p. 121).

The book’s conceptual map (p. 38) positions the notion of identity as a hub where diverse key perspectives come to be negotiated. This centrality of identity is not surprising. Thus, Oliver Marchart’s standard introduction to the field defines cultural studies as “the intellectual endeavour of studying how social and political identity come to be (re)produced, by means of power, in the domain of culture”.¹ However, the two central chapters in *Key Concepts* – Vera Nünning’s chapter on identity (ch. 6) and Philipp Löffler’s on intersectionality (ch. 7) – place the accent very firmly on individual agency. They are primarily concerned about expressive “self-realization” (p. 210) and appear relatively uninterested in how super-individual constellations shape the production of the very self that strives for recognition. The deaccentuation of what Marchart’s formula emphasizes as “power” goes along with a surprising willingness to admit essentialist figures, including the commonplace that “people are born in a particular way” and that such particularity might be linked to “biology” (p. 171; cf. p. 175).

Old-style cultural studies prolong (perhaps beyond breaking point) an ideal of emancipation that is rooted in the Enlightenment. Against this background, *Key Concepts* can be read as groping for a new foundation – one that might allow us to leave the deconstruction

¹ Oliver Marchart, *Cultural Studies* (Konstanz: UVK / UTB, 2008), p. 35: “Cultural Studies sind jene intellektuelle Praxis, die untersucht, wie soziale und politische Identität qua Macht im Feld der Kultur (re-)produziert wird.“

of subjectivity behind and proceed to a truly constructive identity politics. This comes to the fore in the chapter on intersectionality, especially in its programmatic of seeking “the grounds of identity” in Romantic discourses of “inwardness” and the transcendentalist “belief in the human subject as a being with inner depths” (p. 213). Based on admirable learning, the chapter hearkens back to the theoretical ancestors (Kant and Herder rather than Hegel and Marx) in order to build an argument for “the centrality of identitarian life-scripts” (p. 220) and “the primacy of the subject position” (p. 212). The problematic implications of this line of argument emerge quite clearly when Löffler poses the question of whether class can really be “thrown into the mix of categories” which sustains an intersectionally sensitive identity politics (p. 220). The answer is startling: “[F]rom the standpoint of cultural theory”, it is posited, “social standing has nothing to do with the particularity of individual or collective subject positions” (p. 223; cf. pp. 224–5).

Simultaneously essentializing and emptying out the notion of subject positions, the quoted dictum implicitly demands a radically new conception of the social and of the political. Blandly put, it bespeaks a state of affairs in which the social (as a problematic of distributive justice) is eradicated from the study of culture and in which politics comes to be conceived as hinging on the affordance of an uninhibited expressivity of the essentially given. Indeed, *Key Concepts* combines the functions of an introduction to cultural scholarship, a function that many chapters serve admirably well, with fundamental and highly debatable interventions concerning the established orientation of the field.

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