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**Book Review: Doris Bachmann-Medick Cultural Turns  
Neuorientierungen in den Kulturwissenschaften. Reinbeck bei Hamburg:  
Rowohlt's Enzyklopädie, 2006, 410 pp. ISBN 13: 978 3 499 55675 8 / 10: 3  
499 55675 8**

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*Cultural Sociology* 2008; 2; 417

DOI: 10.1177/17499755080020030704

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Doris Bachmann-Medick

**Cultural Turns – Neuorientierungen in den Kulturwissenschaften.**

Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowohlt's Enzyklopädie, 2006, 410 pp.

ISBN 13: 978 3 499 55675 8 / 10: 3 499 55675 8

■ Reviewed by Matthias Benzer, *University of Manchester*

This German-language publication attempts to map the 'dynamic field of tension' (p. 7, all translations M. B.) opened up by the cultural sciences in their turn away from 'grand narratives' and 'master paradigms' (p. 17). The author explores seven major *cultural turns*: the interpretive, performative, reflexive/literary, postcolonial, translational, spatial, and iconic turns. The linguistic turn resurfaces throughout the book as the 'Mega-Turn' that triggers, suffuses, and is repeatedly challenged by, each successive cultural turn (p. 33–43, 384). The book's exegetic-analytical framework, which diversifies the cultural turn into different turns, is supposed to ensure that the cultural sciences are grasped in their multiplicity of perspectives and pluralisation of methods. The various turns are interrelated (also historically), but each contributes its own focus, conceptual vocabulary, and approach. The author expressly refuses to treat the cultural sciences as a singular discipline, under the heading of a unified 'paradigm shift' (p. 16–19), or as 'strands of theory' such as structuralism, semiotics, poststructuralism etc. (p. 22). The English term *turns* – used throughout instead of the more finalistic German *Wende* (p. 31–32) – reflects the objective to represent the dynamic character of each major cultural-scientific development. Of particular importance are the respective 'reversals' (*Umschlag*) from the discovery of new substantive areas to the construction of new analytical concepts (p. 25–27), and the possibility that the different turns continue or initiate new ones. In addition to offering an organised portrayal of the key innovations in cultural science over the past four decades, the book also seeks to discuss their significance for researching cultural life (p. 11, 27–28 & 48).

Although the author thus pursues several overall aims, the book's substantive chapters – each dedicated to one cultural turn – lend themselves to individual study. Special weight might be given to the first chapter, which discusses the *interpretive turn* of the early 1970s. The *interpretive turn* is described as momentous for the reorientation of the cultural sciences in respect of its research 'objects' and 'methodical approaches' (p. 92). Inspired by ethnology, and reacting against structural functionalism and quasi-natural scientific explanations in social anthropology (p. 60–65), scholars such as Geertz prioritised the interpretation of cultural components – 'institutions, actions, images, events, customs' – with a view to what they meant for their 'bearers' (p. 63). In an influential move, cultural science began to treat culture as a 'context of meaning' (p. 65), i.e. as a 'text' (p. 70–79). Engaging in the 'microanalysis' of cultural details (p. 67), interpretation was to unearth the underlying 'objective structures of meanings ... beyond the subjectivity of intentions' without erasing

the alien-ness or strangeness (*Fremde*) of foreign cultures (p. 73). The author convincingly shows that although the *interpretive turn* has been met with some criticism (p. 75–79), its notion of ‘culture *qua* text’ and its method of ‘preserving the strange’ has had a lasting impact on disciplines as varied as literary studies, history, sociology, and political science (p. 79–90). Unfortunately, the significance of the *interpretive turn* for cultural critique and its techniques of rendering familiar western cultures strange is only briefly indicated (p. 90–93).

The remaining chapters similarly interweave intellectual history, exegesis, critical analysis and evaluations of the ramifications of the respective turns for cultural research. The third chapter, for instance, discusses the *reflexive turn* of the 1980s. The reflexive reorientation is said to have been inspired by cultural science’s growing awareness of its own cultural determination and influence on its research objects (p. 144–149). This awareness led to a greater emphasis on self-reflection. Cultural-scientific ‘processes of investigation, modes of writing, and texts’ (p. 148) themselves came to be investigated for the ‘forms of authority[,]...claims to power’, and literary strategies (p. 149) operating in them. Heralding a ‘crisis of representation’, cultural scientists began to entertain the suspicion that the scientific discourse on culture was no more than a ‘half truth’: a ‘socially embedded narrative enterprise’ (p. 153) steered by ‘power relations and discourses’ of which authors remained largely unaware (p. 151). Cultural science was also increasingly investigated as cultural production, especially as the scientific construction of the non-western ‘other’, with potentially immense implications for ethnic politics. Although it has been confronted with a range of criticisms – notably that it largely involved deconstructions of, rather than methodological contributions to, cultural science (p. 167–174) – the *reflexive turn*, the author notes, has been influential in numerous scientific areas (p. 159–167).

Chapter five is worth highlighting because it discusses the *translational turn*, which seems to be of outstanding relevance to the author. The development of a global society and multicultural societies over the past thirty years has made translation a decisive problem. The concept has been enlarged to include not only the translation of texts but a ‘more encompassing translation of culture’ (p. 240). Recent translation studies have framed the translation of foreign texts as dependent on the ‘thick translation’ of underlying ‘modes of thinking, images of the world and different practices’ (p. 243). This has occasioned a breakthrough of translation in cultural science. The *translational turn* is still in the making, though, leading the author to dedicate her ‘conceptualising summary’ (p. 238) to its further development. Cultural science, she argues, might benefit from conceiving culture itself as a translational process that creates new cultural spheres. Inquiries could centre on the modes of transferral (p. 245–250) and exchange (p. 251–254) as well as the mistranslations and misunderstandings (p. 254–256) between cultures. Eventually, the category of translation could acquire the status of an analytical concept: its representation of spaces between cultures challenges binary and essentialist images of cultural identity; it provides a model – perhaps superior to that of ‘interdisciplinarity’ – for conceptually connecting disciplines; and it has the potential to transform the comparative study of cultures (p. 256–260).

The author concludes that the seven cultural turns share four key characteristics: they prioritise perspectives of process over statements about being; they shift the focus onto ‘references of action and reality’ and ‘intercultural’ exchange; they emphasise the linguistic “mediation” of world views; and they encourage the replacement of ‘dichotomies and essentialisations’ with ‘relations of overlap and translation’ (p. 383). The book’s outlook on the future of cultural science is tentative: many turns are still evolving and new ones are developing. The *(neuro)biological* and *global turns* (p. 389–401) can be expected to raise particularly severe challenges to the study of culture. They might even occasion turns of, rather than only within, the field. Cultural scientists face the task of realising the potential of their endeavours to respond to these challenges.

*Cultural Turns* succeeds at providing a helpful map of an intellectually and historically far-reaching and conceptually complex arena. Its map conveys the diverse and dynamic character of major substantive and methodical reorientations that have shaped contemporary cultural science. However, the implications of the various turns for future cultural-scientific research are not discussed in detail. Moreover, several exciting puzzles raised by the book are pointed at rather than fleshed out. This has made some issues seem more straightforward than they would be on closer scrutiny. The relationship between the *reflexive turn* and post-modernism (a problematic term used uncritically in the book) is merely gestured towards, for instance. The claim that it is necessary to let the concept of *translation* refine the concept of *hybridity* is not sufficiently developed (p. 249–250). The book will mainly interest readers looking for an accessible, comprehensive, and coherent overview of the salient developments that have made the *cultural turn* turn. For those interested in exploring the respective developments in more depth, each chapter provides a comprehensive reading list.

Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (eds)

**Making Things Public**

The MIT Press, London, Cambridge, MA, 2006, \$55 hbk, 1074pp.

ISBN: 978-0-262-12279-5

■ Reviewed by Charles Turner, *University of Warwick, UK*

One evening in Paris, a distinguished Professor of Sociology and Anthropology is sitting at his desk. In front of him is a computer screen, around him the walls are lined with books. In his hand is a telephone. He touches the keys, puts the receiver to his ear, and waits. Meanwhile, in London, a distinguished Professor of Art History is sitting at home; perhaps he is poring over prints of the paintings of Lucas Cranach. The phone rings, he picks it up and listens. Later that evening (European time) a distinguished Professor of the History of Science is in his office at Harvard, preparing for a graduate seminar on the history of clock-making, when the