

Meusburger, P., Freytag, T. and Suarsana, L. (eds.): Ethnic and Cultural Dimensions of Knowledge. Dordrecht, Springer, 2016. 304 p.

In contemporary academic discourses one can scarcely find any views questioning the pivotal role of culture in knowledge systems. The close relationship between cultural values and learning processes is distinctly highlighted in the processes of communication, adaptation, acculturation, hybridisation and the individual's subjective interpretation of the world itself. Cultural identities, which might be intertwined with ethnicity as well, can significantly influence attitudes towards school and education. Therefore, gathering knowledge is strongly linked to and influenced by the cultural dimension: "Every form of knowledge is somehow 'cultural'" (STROHMAYER, U. 2003, p. 521.). This aspect should be taken into account while one is investigating topics related to knowledge, for different cultural patterns may either assist or hinder the process of learning.

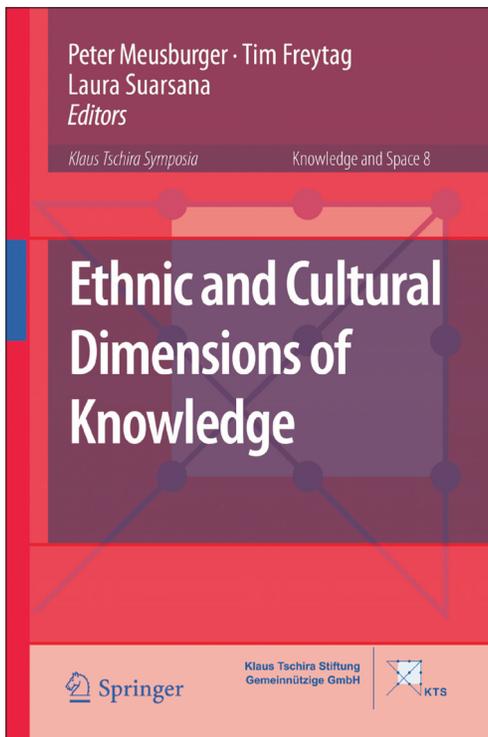
Despite the paramount importance and relevance of these issues, the moderate interest from geographers might be surprising. Proponents of new cultural geography have accused traditional cultural geography of paying too much attention on material forms of culture instead of investigating their mean-

ing, symbolism, textuality or social embeddedness. The new cultural geography, however, still neglects to focus on problems such as consequences of racial and ethnic disparities in educational attainment, the impact of cultural factors on cognitive capacities and educational attainment or the suppression of minorities through the educational system. Terms such as knowledge or education are quite omitted in the comprehensive handbooks of cultural geography (MITCHELL, D. 2000; ANDERSON, K. *et al.* 2003; GEBHARDT, H. *et al.* 2003; DUNCAN, J.S. *et al.* 2004; ATKINSON, D. *et al.* 2005). The book of MEUSBURGER, FREYTAG and SUARSANA attempts to fill this gap by presenting multidimensional viewpoints.

The volume is a result of the 8th Symposium of the 'Knowledge and Space' series held in Heidelberg. Its main organisers were Peter MEUSBURGER, distinguished senior professor in the Institute of Geography at the Heidelberg University, Laura SUARSANA, research associate in the same institution, and Tim FREYTAG, professor at the Faculty of Environmental and Natural Resources at Freiburg University. The book consists of 13 chapters, wherein the first five texts deal with issues of education in multiethnic states. The subsequent four chapters explore the relevance of indigenous knowledge in various contexts. The final four chapters highlight the function of culture in everyday situations.

Peter MEUSBURGER presents in his study the educational system as a heavily contentious field of political and cultural interrelations. He evokes the introduction of compulsory education, which had a major impact on the evolution of nation-states, the shaping of the common consciousness of societies and the genesis of nationalism. Given the soft traits of cultural identity, assimilation and transculturation occur continuously, and they are being shaped especially by the educational system.

National governments discovered the potential benefit of this a long time ago, thereby schools could serve as appropriate means for the endeavour of nation-building and pursuits of cultural homogenisation. The study employs examples of this sort, where minorities in multiethnic states undergo different types of discrimination, suppression and forced assimilation during learning processes. Thus, ethnic self-esteem, cultural identity and sense of belonging of the students get reinforced, what results in discrepancy with their cultural roots. Through the wide-ranging examples MEUSBURGER emphasises the importance of situatedness and embeddedness in the spatial context, disapproving universal toolkits in scrutinising cultural diversity.



The next chapter offers an insight into the public school system in the United States, focusing on the specific interconnection of race, power and geography. Adam FAIRCLOUGH attempts to find the proper explanation of why Southern public schools have been constantly more underdeveloped over the centuries than the Northern ones. From the very beginning the South has not showed substantial interest in developing public schools due to a possible menace what educated slaves were thought to mean to the reigning system of social hierarchy. After the Civil War more sophisticated methods emerged in the restriction of Black education, leading to a racially segregated school system that conserved inequality. As a result of the Supreme Court's decision, public schools in the South were finally integrated, thus segregated education was theoretically dismissed. In fact, integrated schools abolished Black schools too. Yet, although an achievement gap still persists between North and South, integration has actually diminished the long-standing disparities.

The narrative of strikingly uneven educational conditions continues to be discussed in the next chapter as well. Werner GAMERITH affirms that the American school system has never fully carried out its mission to put egalitarian ideological concepts in practice. Social stratification along ethnic and racial relations has become an evident part of the daily routines, where schools are no exception. As GAMERITH asserts, the subordination of certain groups was essential in sustaining the American vision of well-being. For instance, ripping Native American children from reservations into boarding schools several hundreds of miles away sheds light on how severe the issue is. As far as differences in education attainment are concerned, financial endowment plays a major role due to the fact that the funding of public schools mainly depends on local property taxes. Thus, school dropouts and low literacy rates coincide in space with patterns of economic underdevelopment.

Tim FREYTAG studies the role education plays in the social reproduction of socioeconomic and cultural inequalities in higher education and research institutions in the southwestern U.S. state of New Mexico. He argues that the factors determining educational success, such as family background or the social milieu, a person's capabilities to learn, the quality of teachers, the availability and accessibility of education infrastructure are all working together. Being aware of the complex intersectionality of a wide range of parameters, Freytag approaches the issue through the conceptual lens of sociocultural and geographical embeddedness. Firstly, he presents the low educational performance of Hispanics mainly on basis of census data. Then he writes from the perspectives of Hispanic students and teachers. His findings suggest that Hispanics tend to be particularly dependent upon their own cultural context in the family, hence the university milieu claims a great challenge from them.

George J. SEFA DEI uses students' narratives of schooling experiences in order to theorise the particular case of Black and other minority youth education in Euro-Canadian contexts. He affirms that prevailing power relations and internal colonial hierarchies hinder identity and empowerment for community-building as well as individual and collective agency. Adopting an anticolonial discursive framework one must dismantle dominant discourses in order to reduce the marginalisation of certain voices and knowledge systems. The anticolonial prism, that is to say, glorifies the local cultural knowledge, which it identifies with equity, social justice, resistance, self-esteem, and fairness. While analysing school dropouts and practices of exclusion the author puts structural, socio-political and human dimensions at the centre, arguing that a complex factor reflecting class, gender, race, ethnicity, power and history should be utilised as primary determinant in the process of re-envisioning the education. The education system generally dispenses with the rich source of knowledge brought by the students from cultural milieus. DEI presents successful students' individual strategies as well, concluding that engagement with social differences can partly explain students' performance.

Heading towards the next thematic part of the book, Chapter 7 offers an exploration of 'indigenous knowledge', especially its links with development studies. The term itself constitutes an attempt to emphasise the prominence of local voices and practices. Adherents of this approach frequently focus on dichotomies of knowledge systems, distinguishing between the so-called 'Western' objective scientific knowledge and the local practical knowledge such as indigenous knowledge, traditional knowledge and native knowledge. The latter systems, however, involve some inconsistency due to the fact that nowadays neither one is truly indigenous to anywhere nor tribal societies identify themselves as indigenous. Employing geographical scales, such as the 'glocal', may lead towards a more adequate understanding about how knowledge is functioning in the contemporary globalised epoch (ROBERTSON, R. 1995). In the case of the Wola people from Papua New Guinea Highlands, Paul SILLITOE discusses ways where language barriers thwart the very first steps of development interventions. As the case of Wola people reflects, assessment and transmission of knowledge varies widely from place to place, what prevents us from finding general answers to developmental problems.

In one of the two chapters of the book dealing with local knowledge, Cristoph ANTWEILER demonstrates that the concept should be conceived as a continuum between formal science and everyday traditionality. These two, as the argument continues, could not be equated nor contrasted because none of them is more valuable than the other one. While the previous chapter examines rural space, this one presents an urban

context. The fieldwork spent in the Indonesian city of Makassar can be regarded as the central thread. Instead of theorising findings, however, ANTWEILER rather deals predominantly with methodological outcomes. He recommends repertory grid method as a promising alternative way of ethnological fieldwork in cognitive anthropology. One of the main advantages of this study is that it offers the reader an appropriate and well-detailed toolkit, which may be quite applicable for similar empirical researches.

Regarding the multidimensional trait of local knowledge, the place-based character should also be taken into account. Accordingly, Marcus NÜSSER and Ravi BAGHEL focus on geographically situated or site-specific knowledge generation. Hence, they intentionally deviate from the aforementioned concept of indigenous knowledge, which foregrounds stakeholders' ethnicity and tradition. Site-specific knowledge emerges through people's practical engagement with their environment. Artificial glaciers reflect upon this topic in Ladakh, where rapid socio-political transformations have taken place, demonstrating the heterogeneous feature of local knowledge. These glaciers used to store frozen water to cope with water scarcity. Yet, current concerns about the global climate change attributed new functions to them, thus local knowledge gets torn apart from its local context. As the case study points out, local knowledge and external scientific knowledge are sometimes hard to separate from each other since their relation is dynamic and fluid.

Diana D. DAVIS presents through the case studies of pastoralists in the Maghreb and Afghanistan how indigenous knowledge has been, and continues to be, eroded. Despite unfavourable environmental conditions, the nomads had been able to produce an impressive number of livestock and agricultural harvest until the 19th century, but the consequent suppressive measures imposed by the colonialist expert knowledge continuously deteriorated the complex ecological knowledge system of pastoralists. Concerning the Maghreb, the French restricted the accessibility to natural resources, appropriated agricultural lands and forest, imposed incompatible veterinary medicine on the local population, and prohibited common techniques such as using fire on the lands. Most of the adverse laws remained in effect under the post-colonial era too, what supplemented by the mainstream development projects resulted in the further loss of indigenous knowledge. In Afghanistan Koochi women possessed a rich knowledge of how to treat animals and their diseases. Western developmental programs failed to take account of local gender relations though, hampering women's traditional way of life. There can be no doubt that the author is truly committed to preserve indigenous knowledge.

Chapter 11 offers probably the most peculiar insight into how indigenous knowledge really manifests itself in practice. The extensive field research in

the Papua New Guinean Trobriand Islands by Gunter SENFT helps us understand the gradual shrinkage of indigenous knowledge, which is indirectly facilitated by the cultural and economic dimensions of globalisation. Among the population of the islands the construction of large seagoing, so-called *masawa* canoes used to be the end-product of a complex cooperation, which included different forms of technical and magical knowledge. The process of making these canoes was deeply integrated into the community's social network. Thereby the building process was a matter of bringing people together and letting them take part in the distribution of knowledge. In consequence of the changing economical-political external environment, *dinglies* started to replace *masawa* canoes. The decay of canoe building had a crucial impact not only on technologies, social events and the traditional faith, but affected people's cultural identities and cognitive capacities as well.

The subsequent chapter deconstructs the precolonial Igbo societies' ceremonies, highlighting the peculiar trait of these norm-bearing activities. Taking Ikechi MGBEJI's argument, instead of considering ceremonies as a manifestation of marry-making and pointless ritualistic drama, he looks beyond the normative traits and perceives them as crucial events in order to transmit knowledge. The study offers an in-depth description of ceremonies taking place in the Igbo society (for example birth, marriage, burial, passage into adulthood). According to MGBEJI's conclusion, the ceremonies should be reconceptualised as principal means for encoding traditional knowledge and practices. One could consider Igbo as either a speaker of the language, the area occupied by the community, the language, or the ethnic group itself. Nevertheless, the colonialism affected all these spheres, thus the whole cultural practices of Igbo have been subjected to westernisation designed to overwrite native law by the English common law. During the colonial and even postcolonial periods ceremonies thereby significantly lost the capability of transferring key knowledge among each other.

In the last chapter William T.S. GOULD reveals the existing cleavage between knowledge and behaviour in the context of HIV/AIDS prevalence in Sub-Saharan Africa. In recent development studies, as the modernist way of spreading factual knowledge has become a dubious project, a new approach emphasises the awareness on existing indigenous knowledge systems. Regardless of formal or indigenous knowledge acquisition, however, access to more and better information per se is not sufficient to enhance living conditions in a certain group. Despite the fact that knowledge about avoidance is getting quite accessible nowadays, we still experience rising infection rates due to the prevailing gap between knowledge and behaviour. There seems to be medical evidence for two practices efficiently reducing HIV prevalence rates,

namely male circumcision and reducing the number of sexual partners. Nevertheless, both practices are deeply connected to cultural factors. For example, one could not deem male circumcision as a mere medical intervention, but rather a momentous cultural event. Not surprisingly, the less this intervention is being part of the custom, the higher HIV prevalence comes about.

Given the heterogeneous ethnic patterns and different cultural attitudes in East Central Europe, some chapters of the book can contribute to a more sophisticated interpretation of sociocultural processes in the region. Attempts to assimilate ethnic minorities have had a long history here, and the conflicts after the fall of the Iron Curtain proved that ethnic conflicts have not ended yet. Nonetheless, contemporary conflicts have rather been transferred into soft spaces like education. Thus, the theoretical framework and methodological references of the volume can be made use of in education systems of this region. Furthermore, the anti-colonial approach presented by George J. SEFA DEI can be useful in the East Central European context as well, due to the socialist past and the former subordination to the Soviet Union.

Investigating different dimensions of knowledge will remain a prominently contentious field of interdisciplinary research. As pointed out in the book, history, environmental studies, cultural anthropology, jurisprudence and psycholinguistics could also contribute to the issues of traditional, local and indigenous knowledge. Moreover, geography reminds us about the relevance of various scales and the spatial context. By offering a multi-perspective outline, the book substantially extends the discussion about the interrelated questions of culture and knowledge. Thus, it serves as a proper starting point for all of those, including academics, students or those outside of science, who are interested in the cultural aspects of the generation and diffusion of knowledge.

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