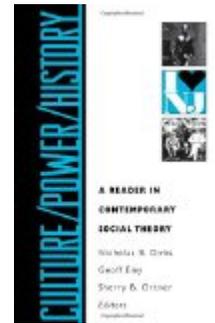


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Nicholas B. Dirks, Geoff Eley, Sherry B. Ortner, eds. *Culture/Power/History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory* (Princeton Studies in Culture/Power/History). Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994. xiv + 621 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-03220-7; \$37.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-691-02102-7.

Reviewed by Steven Mintz (University of Houston)
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Designed for use in cultural studies courses, *Culture/Power/History* combines classic theoretical statements on cross-cultural representation, cultural construction, everyday forms of resistance, feminist theory, the invention of tradition, and textual analysis, by Linda Alcoff, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Steven Greenblatt, Stuart Hall, Sherry B. Ortner, Marshall Sahlins, and Raymond Williams, with essays that concretely apply recent social theory to film (Elizabeth G. Traube), nineteenth century gender politics (Sally Alexander, Geoff Eley), insurgency (Nicholas B. Dirks, Ranajit Guha), museums (Tony Bennett, Donna Haraway), photography (Judith Williamson), popular music and video (Dick Hebdige, Susan McClary), and televangelism (Susan Harding).

An impressive introduction discusses how the concepts of culture and power have been radically revised since the early 1960s, when Parsonian systems theory and Levi-Straussian structuralism defined the contours of theoretical inquiry. Tracing the growing influence of Foucauldian notions of discourse and Gramscian notions of hegemony, as well as the growing emphasis attached to individual agency, resistance, and social transformation, the editors show how earlier assumptions were overturned. No longer is culture conceived as a coherent, highly integrated system of beliefs and behaviors, but as a system of multiple discourses in which individuals participate differentially along lines of class, gender, ethnicity, and race. No longer is power, authority, and

domination viewed in terms of actors, subjects, or functional roles. The realm of authority has expanded from the political to the private spheres, including the workplace, the recreational domain, the family, and indeed, definitions of feeling and reality, and power is now seen as always subject to negotiation and contestation.

The “case studies” give a great deal of concreteness to these abstract theoretical principles. Thus, Bennett, for example, shows how public exhibitions disseminated “legible lessons” about national history and tradition and a country’s relations to “third world” peoples, while Haraway shows how the exhibits in the American Museum of Natural History reflected the psychology of turn-of-the-century upper class men anxious about racial purity and race suicide. Guha demonstrates how to recover peasant resistance from colonial records that depicted subaltern resistance in terms of pathology, religious fanaticism, and cultural anomie. Williamson shows how family photographs give expression to a broader ideology emphasizing “democracy” and “leisure,” while Traube shows how youth films of the 1980s dealt with anxieties about entering the corporate world by reworking an earlier ethic of corporate conformity.

Sparkling with insights and ideas, *Culture/Power/History* offers a highly readable and accessible introduction to the ways that cultural studies has revolutionized anthropology, literary criticism, social history, and the analysis of popular culture.

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