

Reviews

New Dissertations

Cultural Analysis of the Brain

Michael Andersen, *A Question of Location – Life with Fatigue after Stroke*. Det Humanistiske Fakultet, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen 2014. 187 pp. Diss.

■ The brain has received little attention in ethnology. Yet it is the brain that in many ways both shapes our actual lives, and today, through neuroscience, shapes the way we look at ourselves. Knowledge produced by neuroscientists is to a large extent shaping our understanding of the Self. In simple terms we could say that we have gone from seeing the man with a Soul to seeing the man with a Brain. This is knowledge in constant transformation, which should be of ethnological interest as regards how knowledge is produced and reproduced in people's everyday lives. It can be neuroscientists' work in the laboratory or living with, for example, Parkinson's disease, a degenerative disorder that results from the death of dopamine-generating cells in the midbrain. But the reverse perspective is also of interest for the cultural analysis of the brain. Even if the brain is absent in our everyday lives and we don't need to think on or with the brain, it is part of our bodies' being-in-the-world. This becomes clear when a person gets a brain disease and the symptoms become something that defines the features of our being. From this perspective the brain becomes a thing that an individual starts relating to, but also something that the individual no longer can control. For a person with Parkinson's disease the brain is the uncontrollable factor that rapidly changes the perception of the everyday life of eating, walking and dressing oneself. The experiences of the brain, the everyday with an illness and the neuroscientific knowledge will together create and affect what we can call being-in-the-world. Ethnology should be more progressive when it comes to research questions that relate to these field because it is rapidly changing.

In Michael Andersen's PhD thesis *A Question of Location – Life with Fatigue after Stroke* these perspectives are highlighted and developed in a very exiting book. In the beginning he defines his thesis by writing: "A fieldwork oriented cultural analysis of how fatigue is diagnosed, treated, understood and managed with an emphasis on the relation between

science and everyday life. In collaboration with Glostrup Hospital, the proposal presented a specific ethnological take that emphasized everyday life to address an overall question of the experiences of fatigue among people who have had a stroke" (p. 3). Here it is the stroke that makes the absent brain noticeable and a factor that changes the person's being-in-the-world. More specifically, Andersen is interested in the disruption that can be seen as that situation where the mundane everyday life becomes visible. From an ethnological perspective this disruption, as Jonas Frykman has pointed out in the book *Berörd* (2012), lets us notice the culture phenomena that we are enclosed in; it can be the body or how we relate to our brain. For Andersen the empirical fieldwork let him uncover fatigue as a consequence of the stroke and something that the persons he study is struggling with in their everyday life. Andersen writes: "As the exposition demonstrates, stroke is a disruption and, as such, an event that instigates a change to the experience of fatigue. Thus, it institutes a range of new locations as well as provides old locations with a new force" (p. 7). So, disruption becomes a central methodological perception to open up empirical and theoretical questions concerning location. In "Locating fatigue" these questions are defined from a theoretical background where Andersen connects his study to an existentialist-phenomenological tradition, as well as to the field of STS and ANT. But he makes an important remark here and it is that his study focuses more on the human subject than the object. At the same time as ethnology is the study of things and objects, it is "the study of how reality is perceived and how people attempt to create order and intelligibility in their world" (p. 15).

In chapter two, "Introducing fatigue through acedia and neurasthenia", the history of acedia and neurasthenia is focused on as a genealogical approach to give an explanatory framework for fatigue. Of special interest is how fatigue is explained as located in different positions and how location is central if we want to understand these conditions. But Andersen also has a theoretical objective for this chapter, which is to combine the genealogical approach with the existentialist-phenomenological tradition. This is a big assignment in which one chapter is not enough, but he opens up a number of interesting perspectives for ethnology to continue developing. Finding a methodology for historical

studies with an existentialist-phenomenological perspective is interesting, and as Andersen also points out, a possibility to avoid both essentialism and universalism.

The next chapter is more of a methodological chapter that is focused on the ethnological fieldwork. Most often these are placed in the introduction, but here it is between the more historical chapter and the fieldwork. Andersen justifies his different methodological considerations well and gives a good perspective on why he has chosen interviews as the main material. He also discusses how he develops this method, not only listening, but also observing how the interviewees become tired. “[L]istening”, he writes, “is not only a passive exercise, but aside from body language etc., also entails saying the right things at the right time” (p. 63).

In “A disrupted return to everyday life” Andersen presents the interviews and what they can say about everyday life after a stroke and living with fatigue. He is interested in how the stroke impacts the narrative identity as a part of the individual’s overall illness narratives. Important themes that are presented are the anxiety about returning to everyday life and living with the healthcare monitoring. Anxiety is also connected to loneliness and returning home to an empty house, or to a husband or wife who doesn’t understand. From a theoretical perspective fatigue is discussed as something that after a while is incorporated in one’s being and everyday life is once again filled with meaning.

A rather short theoretical chapter called “The narratives of fatigue” explains how narrations are an important part of how self-identity is constructed. Andersen discusses how multiple and contradictory configurations can make sense within a specific narrative. With these perspective self-identity is something that, as he writes, “is constantly open for changes and may co-exist along with other narratives” (p. 99). But the chapter shall be read in relation to the chapters that follow. In “The narrative as communal” history is used to understand how the individual makes sense of his or her own self. Here Andersen uses the stroke as the historical event where narratives can be used to make sense and provide meaning for one’s own self. It is a chapter that focuses too much on psychoanalytical perspectives; the already used Kierkegaardian take would in fact be sufficient, that life must be lived forwards, but it is understood backwards.

The chapter “The regimes of hope” is related to the two previous chapters, and here the narratives of “hoping for progress” are analysed. Hope is related here to the bigger narrative that “being positive will change one’s life for the better, even in case of immense crisis” (p. 110). Here the stroke can be seen or described as the crisis, but what follows is the search for a will. This can be a hope for progress, or a hope that no further negative changes will occur in life. But it is also related to Kierkegaard’s perspective that the person understands the crisis backwards, and in this way narrates a hope for progress in the future.

Narratives are central in “Locating pain” too, even though the main theoretical perspective is that it is the body that is in pain. Andersen finds instead in his fieldwork that the pain is communicable, but, as he writes, “not by how it is physically felt, but by the location of the object to which it is connected” (p. 121). The thematic narratives in the chapter are very interesting, both how pain and sleep are intertwined, and how the persons manage the pain. Central for these themes is the analytical point that pain can “be located in multiple places at the same time” (p. 129), and that it is often intertwined with fatigue.

In “Being normal – stigma and progress” the issue of normality is further developed as one of the perspective that is dwelled upon in previous chapters. Andersen emphasizes that it is mostly in the interviews with the younger informants that questions of normality arise. This is interesting and could be used to give a culture-analytic understanding of the meaning of age when it comes to different illnesses. In the chapter the informants struggle to present themselves and their condition is discussed, and Kleinman’s “sickness limbo” is used as a good metaphor. Also everyday stuff, like the bicycle, is explained here as an object that the informants use to appear more “normal”.

In the chapter “This ‘Other’ brain of mine” Andersen focuses once again on the brain. What is central in this chapter is that he presents “the brain as both an invading force on one’s sense of self and as an integral part of this self” (p. 140). Going to the narratives from the informants, Andersen explains how the brain becomes a retrospective Other that forces the person to (re)construct the self. Also central is the relation the body and Andersen has a presentation of how ethnology can study the brain and the body. So, even if the brain – as part of the human

body – has received little attention in ethnology, this chapter is a very good beginning of such a development.

In the last chapter, “A question of location”, the concept of location is discussed and further developed as a perspective to analyse and understand that “location is both place and practice” (p. 161). Fatigue should therefore be understood not only as situated, but also experienced as tied to its manifestation in its specific location. Andersen argues here that ethnological analysis should understand and study the location of fatigue, and I would say all types of physical phenomena. A very good point he makes is that ethnology can bring in the experience of everyday life, instead of quality of life.

Andersen’s study is an important contribution to the growing field of medical humanities, where ethnology has an obvious place as a subject that works in and with the medical field. To be established in this field, however, we need to rely more on and be even closer to the empirical data from the field. It is in the field that we can start to develop a cultural-analytical understanding of what it is like to have an everyday life with a brain that does not work as we expect it to do. Andersen’s study is a good beginning of an ethnology that is interested in the neuroscience issues that are growing today.

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Folding Time in Archaeology

Elin Engström, Eketorps veckningar. Hur arkeologi formar tid, rum och kön. Stockholm Studies in Archaeology 63. Institutionen för arkeologi och antikens kultur, Stockholms universitet 2015. 287 pp. Ill. Diss. ISBN 978-91-7649-152-2.

■ One of Öland’s best-known tourist attractions is the Eketorp fort in the south-east of the island. Eketorp belongs to the archaeological group of ring-forts, circular stone walls enclosing an inner area. In Sweden these are mainly found on Öland and Gotland. With its diameter of 75 m, Eketorp is regarded as a “fairly small fort” (Stenberger 1964:549). The site attracted antiquarian attention early on, with J. H. Rhezelius visiting it in 1634. Linnaeus saw Eketorp fort “with its ruins and fallen walls” on his tour of Öland in 1741 and stated that the fort had served as a “refuge” for the population. A couple of times in the nineteenth century the place was visited

once again by antiquarians, and in 1931 the Uppsala archaeologist Mårten Stenberger (1898–1973) undertook a small test excavation for his dissertation on Öland’s Iron Age settlement. In 1964, when Stenberger had retired from his professorship at Uppsala University he initiated a major research project about the fort called the *Eketorp Excavation*. The main purpose was to clarify the chronology of the fort, which had remained uncertain after the test excavation. In 1974, after eleven field seasons, the excavations were completed. By then the interior of the fort had revealed three settlement phases: the oldest phase, interpreted as a refuge stronghold from the fourth century AD, a fortified village in the fifth to seventh centuries, and a medieval fortified garrison from c. 1170–1240. Stenberger died suddenly in 1973, when the fieldwork still had not been completed. A huge corpus of material had been collected and was awaiting analysis and interpretation. In the meantime there had been discussions of a reconstruction of the fort. When the project *Eketorp Rediviva* was established by the National Heritage Board, work began on rebuilding the fort on a scientific experimental foundation. As the years passed, the work was increasingly geared to teaching the cultural heritage. The project was now managed by the County Museum in Kalmar, which created a visitors’ site with various activities to bring the past to life.

In her doctoral dissertation, the title of which means “The folds of Eketorp: How archaeology shapes time, space, and gender”, Elin Engström discusses the position of Eketorp in archaeology from the start of Stenberger’s project until today’s tourist attraction. With the “new cultural history” and its focus on meaning-making processes concerning how cultural history is *made* rather than what it *is*, Engström lets different analytical themes and empirical evidence meet. She formulates the purpose of the dissertation thus: “to show how Eketorp as a museal site interacts with archaeological text, and archaeological and antiquarian practice, and to show the material effects of these relations” (p. 32).

Engström’s dissertation is part of the growing field of research in the history of archaeology. By focusing the questions on the meaning of societal processes, largely interpreted on the basis of archival material, Engström wants to view herself chiefly as a representative of externalist historiography (p. 94; see Gustafsson 2001).