

Missing Persons: A Critique of Personhood in the Social Sciences, by Mary Douglas and Steven Ney, Berkeley: University of California Press, (1998) xiv, 223 pp.

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This book is a discussion of a blind spot in social science - the western cultural consensus based on the ideas of free markets and individualism - that has led many social scientists to consider poverty as a personal experience, a deprivation of material things, and a failure of just distribution. These concepts are grounded in a nonrelational definition of the person, a theoretical being without social attributes or moral principles.

The authors specify four official Western conversations about poverty and well-being, based on a nonsocial individual with basic needs (food, clothing, shelter), higher needs (arts, self-fulfillment), wants (economic preferences), and capabilities (actualization, opportunity, equity), which provide the framework for provision of 'relief,' public assistance and the welfare state as well as social indicator and quality of life research. Douglas and Ney argue that the tradition of individualism applied to poverty and well being is full of contradictions when viewed with anthropology's multicultural lens. A key point for anthropologists is that welfare is not an abstract concept, but translates into, or is transfigured by, experiences of real actors in concrete situations. Bourdieu's theory of 'habitas' (Bourdieu 1977) is one of the anthropological theories invoked in such accounts to explain the nature of the relationships between the cared for, their care givers, and the social, cultural and political-economic milieu in which their interactions take place. Thus, the need for welfare is a product of, and provisions of welfare a response to, power relationships in society. Douglas and Ney cite the respondents in Bourdieu's (1993) *La Misère du Monde*, who "suffered ... from problems about other people, the absence of certain desired presences, and the too-intrusive official presence of others. The form that poverty took in this book had a lot to do with the poor person's lack of control over other people" (p.20).

Marilyn Strathern calls the Western idea of 'the free-standing, self-contained individual' a folk model, in which 'because society is likened to an environment ... it is possible for Euro-Americans to think of individual persons as relating not to other persons but to society as such, and to think of relations as after the fact of the individual's personhood rather than integral to it' (Strathern 1992: 124-125). The conceptually close Western idea of altruism is illustrative in its distinction between self-interested and other-interested motives. This distinction is confounding in Melanesia where the motives of selves are always thought to be other-directed and personal identity is best understood as a network of transactions in which that person has been engaged and can be expected to create in the future. Douglas and Ney point out that 'to recognize that the main motive for acquiring objects is to be able to give them away is very different from the implicit assumption [underlying Economic Man] that consumption goods are acquired to be consumed by the buyer' (p. 9).

In *Missing Persons*, the authors trace through two centuries of intellectual history the diffusion of the idea of Economic Man, an individual operating in isolation in an economic realm. They follow the figure of Economic Man from its semi-technical niche in eighteenth century economic theory into a favored institutional form (with its own version of workable knowledge) in the diverse fields of psychology, consumption, public assistance, political science

and philosophy. They argue that its appeal lies in the anthropomorphizing of what is essentially a market theory: 'The bodily organism is used as a model for the psyche, and both psyche and organism are used as a model for the market. All three are rationalized by the idea of hierarchies and needs' (p. 39). They find the concept (which they refer to as "A Way of Saying Nothing") to be rooted in two principles, the idea of the solipsist self, and the idea of avoiding political bias. These assumptions often distort the statistical data collected by social scientists about human agents in economic and political affairs. Rather than promoting objectivity, these principles often protect a political bias. This point has been examined in some detail by Schram (1995) who shows how welfare policy research is embedded in state practice and structures; written from a top-down position and in a managerial discourse, relying on an assumed cost-benefit analysis. Like Nancy Fraser (1989), he sees welfare policy discourse as a "politics of needs interpretation," which, similar to ethnographies that articulate alternative understanding of recipients and their needs, "provides a basis for contesting the way in which the existing bureaucratic discourse imputes identities and needs to persons seeking assistance" (Schram 1995: 43).

Douglas and Ney argue that the individualistic model of the person, fostered in large part by economics, has profoundly affected how we think about our needs and well-being. The authors propose to correct this by revising the current model of the person; taking cultural variation into account while giving full play to political dissent. They see a multicultural context as allowing a far more even-handed view of issues such as poverty and well being and identify four varieties of cultural personhood; individualist, hierarchist, enclavist, and isolate, distinguished on the basis of structure and incorporation, which are potentially present in any community. Each has a distinctive definition of well being that it would like public policy to achieve. "Individualists" aim to free themselves from the fetters of social restriction. They thrive on loose organizational structure. Well-being for them means the freedom to pursue self-interested ends. "Hierarchists" seek to make a community that is an orderly system; their moral framework is one of differentiated obligations according to place in complex organizational structures. They have a broader, longer-term, stratified conception of well being. "Enclavists" strive to create a community that is free of control. Morally, they appeal to subjectivity and individual conscience. Enclavists perceive well being on a global scale: Everyone is equal, and well being is a world free from domination and inequality. "Isolates," by definition, are cut off from political maneuvering and influence. They do not have a coherent idea of well being and do not expect coherence from policy makers.

According to Douglas and Ney, by interpreting the intentions of stereotypical others according to the language of cultural conflict, each culture achieves logical closure on its premises and succeeds in reproducing its own system of control and accountability. Thus, policy arguments reflect the social context from which they emerge and the conflicting norms and aspirations provide the basis for policy conflict. Relying on Hajer's idea of a discourse coalition, "a group of actors who share a social construct" (Hajer 1993: 43), the authors see such groups, which they refer to as "cultures in dialogue" (p. 126), as battling in the public sphere for legitimacy. They provide examples which illustrate how distinctive cultures produce policy arguments that articulate their culture's construction of well-being and go on to critique theories of policy conflict, for example, pluralist incrementalism (Lindbloom 1965, Collingridge 1992), and civic responsiveness (Putnam 1993), from this vantage point. And, of course, given her earlier work (Douglas 1986), they examine risk perception under the lens of cultural theory. In sum, the authors contend that their theory of cultural personhood provides a way to address the issue of political conflict by offering a concept of the human as a political animal.

In *Missing Persons*, Douglas and Ney have set forth a fundamental critique of the social sciences, drawing from an array of literature, including anthropology, economics, political science, and sociology. They present a compelling argument that *Homo Economicus* is a defective theory of the person, explore how the defects came about, and why they are so difficult to remedy. They offer an alternative view of personhood that takes cultural variation into account while giving full

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play to political dissent. Social scientists, particularly those concerned about poverty and well being, will find this a challenging and valuable polemic.

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**High technology and low-income communities: Prospects for the positive use
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