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Jamie Cohen-Cole, professor of History at the University of Toronto, takes a decidedly new approach to the history of cognitive science in his most recent monograph by focusing on “the open mind.” The open mind referred to a particular psychological disposition characterized in the Cold War era by a sense of autonomy, creativity and resistant to authoritarianism. Although formative to the rise of cognitive science, Cohen-Cole argues that this conception cannot be pinned down within a single intellectual discipline, as it seemed to operate “on all registers at once” (p.254). The emergence of the open mind therefore needs to be situated within a broader spectrum of ideas, politics, relationships and spaces.

Cohen-Cole analyzes how the open mind became a powerful force in Cold War American culture, as it represented for scientists, psychological experts, intellectuals and bureaucrats “their aspirations for the American character and liberal pluralist democracy” (p. 2). This idea performed in three central ways: it served “a political role” in that it led to formation of the ideal citizen; an intellectual role, in that it represented “the model researcher, scientist or thinker”; and finally, it functioned “as a universal model of human nature” (p.4).

The full embrace of the open mind led to the academy’s prioritization of interdisciplinary research, which directly benefitted the emergent field of cognitive science. Indeed, cognitive science was the intellectual space in which the principles of the open mind made itself most apparent. Cognitive scientists largely reformed the idea of the open mind as representative of their discipline arguing that they, as practitioners, “epitomized the democratic character” deemed necessary for the progress of American culture (p.6).

Through such analysis, Cohen-Cole offers his readers more than simply a unique perspective to the history of cognitive science, but the very means by which the rational, autonomous and ‘centrist’ individual was formed as a construct of ideal humanity in Cold War United States. His study charts the evolution of how social scientists, intellectuals, educators and policy makers attempted to adopt this vision of the open mind for themselves—a struggle that led to the rise and then eventual collapse of centrist politics.
Cohen-Cole’s study begins with how the formation of the American mind became a priority for several social thinkers and policy makers who feared the fracturing of American society as a result of modern life. To remedy such corrosive effects, they turned to the individual mind, intent on forming persons who were creative, autonomous, anti-authoritarian and open-minded. Through such individuals, a unified and democratic American society would be fortified against the threat of totalitarianism.

The academic mind was positioned as exemplary of this desirable person, at least if one embraced interdisciplinary research. Interdisciplinary research environments, in turn, were fashioned as a model for a pluralist American society. This interdisciplinary scholarly community formed in the context of what Cohen-Cole describes as modern day “salons”. These salons were a variety of social gatherings where academics developed a shared set of values that formed the basis by which not only the academy, but all of America would be judged (p.106).

Cohen-Cole then proceeds to detail how the emergent discipline of cognitive science transformed these intellectual virtues into traits of “normal” human nature, very literally recasting the scientist as “everyman” (p.141). To explore this development, he focuses on Harvard’s Center for Cognitive Science, the first institutional home of the discipline, founded by Jerome Bruner and George Miller in 1960.

Cohen-Cole moves onto how the whole-hearted embrace of the open mind made itself known on a national scale, specifically examining the implementation of a social studies public school curriculum referred to as “Man: A Course of Study” (MACOS). Organized by Jerome Bruner between 1964-65, and funded by the National Science Foundation and the Ford Foundation, this curriculum was intended to ensure that school age children were equipped with the necessary virtues of the open mind.

In the final chapter of the book, Cohen-Cole examines how all the identifiable features of the open mind were essentially co-opted by the New Left and feminism in the late 1960s, each of which critiqued centrist politics. Here, Cohen-Cole focuses on Naomi Weisstein, Noam Chomsky and the student movement. While Weisstein claimed that academic hiring practices were based on sexist discrimination rather than on merit, Chomsky damned studies on racial difference by Arthur Jensen and Richard Herrnstein as inherently unscientific. At the same time, student protests
divided liberal theorists and demonstrated the estrangement of the academy from American society (p.235).

The last blow to centrist ideology was a newly invigorated Right-wing movement in the early 1970s, whose members rejected the premise of the open mind altogether. In particular, the Right centered its attention on MACOS. Claiming that MACOS was anti-American, powerful neoconservatives lobbied hard to ensure the curriculum’s demise.

Cohen-Cole’s book is a compelling study that offers academic readers, and particularly those of us who think across disciplinary boundaries, an opportunity to contemplate, question, and perhaps criticize, the means by which Americans form their analysis. To examine the rise of interdisciplinary research, Cohen-Cole emphasizes how social and professional networks provide certain intellectual constructions with a sense of authority. His work thus points to the idea that individuals create lines of communication across institutional and state borders to make certain conceptions of the world seem universal, obvious and “natural” as Cohen-Cole describes (p.3). If successful, this universalizing work grants certain perspectives an impregnable authority that is at once situated and invisible. Cohen-Cole offers a fascinating account of how this process is performed through examining not only professional endeavors, but informal socializing within the “salons” that he describes. His focus on this often neglected realm of interaction sheds new light on how conceptions of the subjective and the self play a pivotal role in the formation of ideas about the human mind, and in turn, politics, education and rationality. By placing individual subjectivity at the center of his analysis, Cohen-Cole responds to other histories of cognitive science, and particularly Margaret A. Boden’s *Mind as Machine: A History of Cognitive Science* (2006). As he contends, “telling the history of early cognitive science by giving agency to the computer and knowledge of its processes would get the arrow of causation backward. If anything, the human and psychological sciences did more to drive computer science than the other way around” (p.255).

Cohen-Cole’s examination of the formation of the subjective self in the midst of political, educational and disciplinary struggle is superb in many respects. However, one aspect of this self that is perhaps under-analyzed in his study is the role of gender. For instance, the social networks that Cohen-Cole considers were undoubtedly gendered in terms of who was permitted to participate and in what ways. The author’s discussion of Margaret Mead would have been one moment in which he could have probed this idea further. Cohen-Cole discusses how Mead, an
influential anthropologist in the 1960s and 1970s, focused on providing appropriate food and drink at conferences. Considering the ways in which women were frequently aligned with domestic foodways, Mead’s concern comes as little surprise (Inness 2006; Neuhaus 2003; Parr 2002). I would have liked to read more about how Mead’s opinions reflected women’s perceived social roles in the context of intellectual networks. Much like the open mind spanned from the individual self to larger political, professional and educational reforms, how do such instances reveal broader conceptions of femininity and the part women were permitted to play in Cold War academic circles?

Arguably, Cohen-Cole begins to take up this thread of analysis in the final chapter of his study. Here he investigates the fracturing of centrist politics, in which feminist thinkers, such as Weisstein, drew attention to sexism within academia. Yet Cohen-Cole’s discussion of feminist criticism only takes up three pages of the entire monograph, making one wonder if this fairly cursory examination is enough. I’d be particularly interested to learn more of how the MACOS represented the open mind as fundamentally male, for example. Gender discrimination in the student movement and the New Left that Cohen-Cole only briefly notes also seems to deserve much more thorough scrutiny.

Cohen-Cole’s monograph is nevertheless innovative and comprehensive in the manner in which it draws seemingly disparate realms into dialogue with one another. Rather than examine the emergence of cognitive science as a purely disciplinary or institutional history, Cohen-Cole situates the field within a broader, yet also more particular debate about the formation of the self. The result is a study that tells the history of not simply cognitive science, but larger reconfigurations of human nature and politics in Cold War America.

Bibliography:

