

Transmitting Culture



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出版者:Columbia University Press

出版时间:2000

装帧:Paperback

isbn:9780231113458

How do we explain the fact that certain ideas, at certain moments in time, can have earthshaking effects? Or that some cultures have left an indelible mark while others have not? Why did Jesus, rather than Mani the Mesopotamian or the Eastern god Mithra, take hold among masses of people? Why did Karl Marx instead of Pierre Proudhon or Auguste Comte leave his mark on the century? Behind these questions lies the matter of the human need to conserve, hand down, and transmit cultural meanings - the study of the means of transmission and of the long evolutionary history of media. In a departure, Régis Debray redefines communication as the inescapable conditioning of civilization's meanings and messages by their technologies of transmission and lays the groundwork for a science of the transmission of cultural forms - in a word, mediology. "Transmitting Culture" examines the difference between communication and transmission and argues that ideas and their legacies should be rethought not in terms of "communication" from sender to receiver but of "mediation" by the vectors and messengers of meaning. "Transmitting Culture" stresses the technologies and institutions long overlooked by philosophy and the human sciences in the study of symbols and signs throughout the history of civilizations. Ranging widely from the history of religion and the printing press to the French and industrial revolutions, from the role and place of authority to scientific inquiry, "Transmitting Culture" establishes a new approach to the cultural history of communication.

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