

Cultural studies and the economic turn

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English version of

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One way of understanding the ‘cultural turn’ in social thought over the last two decades is as a turn away from the economic. An expanding interest in cultural questions within such fields as sociology, geography or political science has gone together with a deepening scepticism and growing indifference towards older economic arguments. As the most obvious expression of such a cultural turn, cultural studies – whether viewed as a tendency within existing disciplines or as an emergent discipline in its own right – has seemed to typify this retreat from the economic within social and political inquiry. It has become a truism of contemporary analysis that other relationships and processes are at least as important as economic factors, and often more so, in the formation of social identities and the reproduction of social inequalities. It is not only or even primarily in the realm of the economic that we form our relations to ourselves and to others, create meaning, act out our social fate or encounter the workings of power. No-one, it seems, would argue otherwise now. The critique of economism, however, has left some unresolved problems – one being a tendency to dismiss economic explanations altogether (so that *any* argument about class, for example, can appear as ‘reductionist’ or simply out-dated); another being the inability to recognise or properly account for economic issues when they do arise. Such problems seem especially pronounced in debates over the relation between economy and culture. If we are now agreed that the cultural is not simply an effect of, or an alibi for, economic arrangements, it is less clear how we are to think about the relation between the two. This is not, of course, only a question for cultural studies, but the growth of cultural studies has concentrated wider arguments over the changing terms of intellectual debate, the purpose and coherence of different disciplines, and the connection between academic knowledge and social and political

critique. The discussion that follows considers the cultural turn in social enquiry both in terms of disciplinary politics and in terms of the fraught relation between culture and economy. What has been the impact of the cultural turn on social science's broader engagement with economic issues? How might perspectives in cultural studies provide insights into contemporary economic arrangements?

Disciplinary manoeuvres

The development of cultural studies has raised some sharp questions about exactly what academic disciplines are for and what they do. An easy answer is that they legitimate certain intellectual credentials and secure institutional territory. In this sense recent border skirmishes over cultural studies revisit the scene of century-old turf wars which marked the boundaries between the social sciences and helped to establish these as distinct fields within the modern university. Arguments about what differentiated psychology from sociology, or sociology in turn from economics, served not only to define fields of enquiry, models of social action or expert methodologies but also to assert academic title and annex institutional space. Appadurai (1996: 26) argues that an idea of 'disciplinarity' can be seen as an historical artefact, derived in part from a late nineteenth-century German model of intellectual inquiry which influenced the development of the American research university. While this model entrenched over time, it was always an arbitrary fix. The anxieties provoked by the cultural turn, and by the many border crossings of cultural studies, may revive some of these older insecurities and unsettled disputes over the academic claims of the different social sciences.

They also reflect new tensions. Cultural studies has been a key domain for recent interdisciplinary work across the social sciences and humanities, at a time of larger changes in the academic and formal organisation of the university. Against this background Appadurai (1996: 27) suggests that the critique of the disciplines is not merely an intellectual exercise, but a form of institutional politics that goes against the trend for universities 'to become factories for specialized research, applied interests, and professional credentializing'. This nicely inverts the terms of those hostile arguments

which write off cultural studies as an excuse for abstraction or anecdote, frivolous or irrelevant research interests, and professional fakery. Other accounts go further, seeing in the challenge to disciplinary knowledge a politics that extends beyond the academy. Cultural studies is not just amiably interdisciplinary – it is fiercely ‘antidisciplinary’, rejecting the balkanisation of knowledge and all associated claims to power (see Aronowitz 1993). This is to take a strong line on the question of what academic disciplines are for: they underpin hierarchies of knowledge and uphold status relations which operate not only in the university but in wider social contexts. A commitment to the popular and the everyday within cultural studies in this way is linked to a broad anti-elitism which refuses the notion that there is any royal road to art, to science, or to politics. Different versions of politics, however, are easily confused, and it is too simple to assume that breaching disciplinary boundaries is somehow ‘subversive’ in itself. The language of transgression and dissent are meant to give a radical air, but look faintly comical when applied to academic debates (see Nelson and Gaonkar 1996; cf. Philo and Miller 2001). This is not to deny the politics of academic knowledge, let alone of academic funding and authority. However marching on the literature department (to paraphrase Todd Gitlin 1995) is not quite the same as storming the Winter Palace, although the lazy jargon of subversion can make it hard to hear the difference.

Given that cultural studies has questioned both the motivations for and the effects of disciplinary histories, it is interesting to note a pronounced – even slightly consuming – concern with its own lineage and limits. Critiques of the canon stand alongside numerous attempts to anthologise cultural studies in its own right (see, for example, During 1993; Engelmann und Osten 1999; Grossberg et al. 1992; Storey 1996). If cultural studies’ founding texts date from the 1950s and 1960s (as proposed by Hall 1980), it is also interesting to observe which authors from its pre-history are retrieved for inclusion in what has become a new canon: bits of Marx and Gramsci; Benjamin and Kracauer; Mauss (rather than Durkheim); Simmel (but usually not Weber). Cultural studies may have been summarily invented in 1964 with the founding of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, but stories of origin retain an appeal – Aronowitz (1993) offers an ‘interpretive genealogy’ of its development across disciplines (see also

Grossberg 1996), while Sparks (1996) traces its paths of 'evolution'. Whatever the history, cultural studies has long outgrown its local roots. Milner and Browitt (2002: 242-4) sketch an international overview of 'the institutionalisation of academic cultural studies' in universities and journals on five continents (for the German context, see Burns 1995; Lindner 2000; Phipps 2002; Wunberg und Musner 2002).

There are limits, however, to the institutional reach of cultural studies. Economics has been relatively untouched by the disciplinary manoeuvres through which cultural studies has gained its academic presence, and remains fairly immune to its advances. There appear to be few internal anxieties that the field might be deformed by any pronounced cultural turn. Of all the social sciences, economics has been the most assured in its intellectual claims and its disciplinary definition. There is plenty of diversity and as much disagreement among economists, but since the late nineteenth century economics has come closest to working within a paradigm which quite clearly demarcates it from other sciences. Such certainty, of course, can be irritating to other social scientists, but criticisms of economics from the outside do little to dent its confidence in its own models and explanations, and even less to undermine the methodological commitment to modelling or the epistemological belief in explanation. Arguments that economic models are devices – artificial, constructed, under-socialised, technical – are regularly rehearsed by various critics but meet with little dispute or excite much consternation among those economists who use them. Meanwhile the cultural features of economic life, which classically were left to such fields as anthropology or sociology, recently have been colonised by economics' adjunct disciplines in business and management studies. If a move away from the economic has been a key part of the 'cultural turn' this has had a dual effect: weakening other social sciences' engagement with economic problems while vacating the field of economic inquiry to the specialists and the true believers.

The culture of the market

Cultural studies may have had only limited exchange with academic economics but it has a more uncertain relation to wider economic discourses. Thomas Frank (2000) has been

scathing about what he sees as a convergence between the self-professed anti-elitism of cultural studies and the market populism that infects contemporary economic life. In this account, the conviction that everyday practices of consumption should be taken seriously as expressive acts can be hard to distinguish from a dominant economic culture which treats the market as the primary site of self-realisation and gratification. It has been an article of faith within cultural studies that consumers – rather than being passive or Pavlovian in the face of commodity culture – are playful, intractable, self-fashioning. In such a celebration of the ordinary user, buying a hamburger or a magazine or a pair of jeans becomes a gesture of ‘agency’. As Frank puts it (2000: 282), there is a propensity to ‘see audience “agency” lurking in every consumer decision’, however banal, predictable or – indeed – irrational. This attitude to the sovereign consumer marks an interesting (one might say worrying) congruence between avowedly radical perspectives in cultural theory, and recent economic and political orthodoxies which take market choice as the epitome of individual freedom and the ideal of social organisation (see also Gitlin 1997). Alternative, avant-garde or sub-cultural modes of consumption, what is more, tend to lose any critical edge in market contexts where hip has become the ‘official capitalist style’ (Frank 1998). For a discipline committed to ideas of resistance and to the analysis of hegemony, it may be the theorists rather than the consumers who prove to be ‘dupes’ of the market.

This strong line of criticism holds that cultural studies’ reflex populism is complicit with a dominant market rhetoric. A more common criticism is that the current fixation on culture within social inquiry undervalues or simply ignores economic problems. The cultural turn is taken to signify a more general retreat from economic arguments across the social sciences, with the effect not only of leaving economic analysis to an expert discipline but also of withdrawing from wider public arguments over economic power and inequality (see Butler 1998; Fraser 1995; Philo and Miller 2001). It is hard, however, to lay this charge against cultural studies itself. Frank highlights the market populism of some cultural studies, but other strands take a more critical approach to contemporary capitalist arrangements. There is no obvious reason for cultural studies to be averse to economic analysis, and little evidence that it is much less concerned with economic

issues than are other social science disciplines. While mainstream economics may be fairly impervious to cultural turnings, cultural studies frequently has taken up economic questions. It had, after all, a founding interest in the social and cultural reproduction of capitalist class relations. It sustains an important tradition of work in the political economy of the media, communications and cultural industries – in spite of ongoing fears that such analysis might look a little unreconstructed in giving greater weight to economic ties than to cultural texts (see, for example, Kellner 1997). The continued growth in studies of consumption, meanwhile, centres on a form of social action that is neither strictly economic nor purely cultural in character.

The economic turn

These links between economy and culture have recently received new emphasis. Indeed there are signs that the latest twist in the cultural turn may be a move back towards economic concerns. Such a trend is evident across a number of fields, with growing critical interest in economic and cultural globalisation, in the creative and cultural industries, in branding and intellectual property, in cultural work and the ‘creative’ classes. This array of themes can be seen as part of a larger project to re-think the relation of culture to economy ‘after’ the cultural turn (see Ray and Sayer 1999). A focus on cultural processes does not simply displace economic issues from the field of inquiry, but it may pose different problems and demand fresh lines of analysis. McRobbie (2002a: 98) argues that in recent ‘cultural studies the turn to work and employment emerges from broader discussion of the “cultural turn” as society and economy appear to be increasingly culturalized’. She notes, however, that a critical grammar for analysing these arrangements is still to be developed. Conventional ways of studying work, employment and economic organisation do not always apply to new forms which confuse the distinctions between leisure and labour, consumption and production, creativity and drudgery. On a similar point, Slater (2002: 75-6) warns that ‘it is particularly crucial to debates within cultural studies and sociology of media and culture that the appropriate methodological response is not an “additive” one, a matter of adding traditional questions

of political economy to a fundamentally cultural analysis, or an argument about the increased centrality of cultural industries in contemporary economy.’

Such arguments reveal a persistent nervousness that, in any encounter between economy and culture, the latter will appear merely as ‘derivative and secondary’ (Butler 1998: 36). Between the twin errors of economic reduction on one side and cultural triviality on the other, there remains uncertainty as to the terms on which economic and cultural analysis should meet. It is now some time since Stuart Hall (1988: 28) asserted that the distinction between economic and cultural change had become ‘quite useless. Culture has ceased to be, if it ever was, a decorative addendum to the “hard world” of production and things, the icing on the cake of the material world.’ There is nothing very new, of course, in the idea that economic exchange has to do with the production and consumption of signs, symbols, aesthetic values and cultural signifiers (Veblen 1934; Bourdieu 1984). Cultural studies has greatly developed these ideas, but certainly did not invent them. Neither is culture confined to the work of ‘magic’ that gives material objects an ideal or fetish character (Williams 1980), or to the framework of values, trends and associations which shapes consumer choice. Cultural factors are not restricted to matters of consumption but also bear on the side of production, in the design of goods and the styling of services, and on that of distribution, in the way that products are conceived for, positioned in or even themselves create markets (see Lash and Urry 1994; du Gay and Pryke 2002). The making of meaning, the production and exchange of signs, runs through different stages of the economic process. These are important arguments and they look right, but they also raise a problem: the sense of the term ‘culture’ – as it applies to these various economic moments – can become diluted, even meaningless. It is hard and may be foolish to insist on any ‘stable distinction between material and cultural life’ (Butler 1998: 36), but it is also difficult to specify just what is cultural about particular economic processes or objects when culture is apparently to be found everywhere in economic life.

These lines of definition may have blurred because critics now tend to view economic forms through a cultural lens, or it may be that contemporary capitalist economies really are more ‘cultural’ than they previously were. Lash and Urry (1994: 61) argue for a

substantive economic shift over recent decades, noting the ‘extent to which culture has penetrated the economy itself, that is, the extent to which symbolic processes... have permeated both consumption *and* production’. The result, they suggest, is the ‘effective de-differentiation of culture and economy’ (ibid: 8) not only as analytic terms but as realities. It is not simply that economic processes – in the wake of the cultural turn – *look* different: they are different. Their account represents one very influential approach to the study of economic life as this becomes more and more ‘culturalised’ (see also Hoffmann und Osten 1999). Writers such as du Gay and Pryke (2002), in contrast, are less interested in arguments that the economy has taken some ‘cultural turn’ of its own, than in examining economic arrangements and things as cultural products. Thinking about economic objects in a cultural frame involves tracing the discursive feints and expert knowledge which put economic realities together. Rather than asking whether the economy has become somehow more cultural, this kind of analysis asks how economic objects – markets, firms, commodities – are defined and economic verities are secured as an effect of certain intellectual and expert cultures. These different approaches to the cultural analysis of the economy are based on different senses of the term ‘culture’: as a sphere of specific practices, images and things, more or less amenable to commodification; and in a broader, anthropological sense of how systems of economic meaning and habits of economic behaviour are produced and exchanged. It involves, we might say, a split between ‘substantive’ and ‘formal’ modes for cultural analysis of the economy – one concerned with the practical role of cultural objects and processes in economic life, the other with the language, techniques and representations through which economic knowledge is reproduced and economic objects are realised. Neither has the final say on how cultural explanations might be brought to economic problems. The first can be over-generalised and too self-consciously innovative, over-stating the importance or the novelty of cultural goods and practices in contemporary economies. The second version of cultural economy can be too sophistic, a neat commentary on economics and its fellow travellers in advertising, marketing, finance and business.

Culture is a notoriously flexible concept, and this is no less true in accounts of economic cultures. Depending on the stance one takes, the cultural aspects of economic life might

refer to the aesthetic, the expressive, the symbolic; to custom or communication; to values, norms or meaning (see Warde 2002). In an ironic inversion of the economic approach to human behaviour in which any social action can be read as a matter of rational choice (Becker 1976; Becker and Murphy 2000), everything economic – it seems – might now be viewed as an effect of cultural practice. It may be true, but ultimately it means very little, for critics to ‘conclude that because economic practice is meaningful, it is thereby cultural’ (ibid: 185). Equally one could say that such meaningful practice is – in Weber’s (and most others’) sense – a type of social action. Describing economic behaviour as ‘cultural’ rather than ‘social’ may be a simple matter of intellectual vogue, but it may also reflect a more general sense in which cultural categories have displaced the grammar of the social. McRobbie (2002b) argues that the social has lost much of its meaning in new ‘creative worlds’ – as a site of political engagement and solidarity; as a ground for differences and inequities; as a space of interaction; as a source of values and security. In contrast, individualised notions of creativity, work and consumption provide the cues for understanding one’s identity, actions and exchanges with others. Current critical inquiry, in thrall to the language of culture, tends to mirror rather than to question this shift.

Is it really the case, then, that the distinction between economy and culture has become ‘quite useless’? Hall’s argument was directed against the old authority given to economic arguments in critical accounts of social change. The ‘de-differentiation of culture and economy’ (Lash and Urry 1994: 8), however, has now become a standard analytic gesture, and one whose effects are worth interrogating. This is particularly so in relation to cultural production or creative work. Arguments that advanced economies were undergoing a shift from *Arbeitsgesellschaft* to *Kultargesellschaft* have not always foreseen the extent to which culture would become colonised as work (see Offe 1984; Schwengel 1990; see also Beck 1999; McRobbie 1999), and in this context the critical edge of cultural studies can in fact depend on maintaining a distinction between cultural and economic factors. In analysing the move from ‘Club to Company’ (2000; 2002b), for example, Angela McRobbie argues that work in the creative or cultural sectors of the economy blurs the distinction between leisure and work, the private and the professional

self, consumer choice and work ethic. It may be outdated for critics to talk about the realm of necessity as distinct from the realm of freedom – and simplistic to treat as economic those things we do because we have to, and the cultural as those things we do because we want to – but fudging these distinctions offers a practical way of regulating and exploiting workers in cultural fields. Discourses of ‘creativity’ offer a means of managing flexible labour processes, as the open-ended nature of creative work lends itself to long or erratic working-hours, casualisation, demanding deadlines, confused and constantly changing briefs. The linkage of cultural work to ideas of self-expression and identity provides a basis for more or less willing self-exploitation, while the aura of the creative workplace helps mask or sweeten power relations in this setting. An emphasis on personal creative ‘style’, furthermore, offers a new way of reproducing rather standard lines of discrimination based on gender, ethnicity or age (see also Sennett 1998). Andrew Ross (1997, 1998), too, analyses the underside of work in the creative economy, focusing on patterns of sweated labour in the fashion industry, and the actual exploitation of ‘virtual’ workers in new media domains. The growing casualisation of academic labour, meanwhile – in particular the many foot-soldiers of the cultural studies boom – gives the lie to any breathless rhetoric about the emergent social and economic power of the knowledge classes (see Frank 2000).

Cultural studies can be an easy target in arguments about intellectual disengagement from economic realities, but these criticisms can be misplaced. The spectre of cultural studies, for one thing, is often a proxy for changing priorities within established social science disciplines. Cultural studies may be the most formal expression of the cultural turn in social inquiry, but it is hardly answerable for all its effects. Cultural studies itself, furthermore, continues to produce critical accounts of the intersection of culture and economy in such fields as class, work, ideology and identity. Such analytical potential, however, may depend on maintaining the differentiation between the economic and the cultural – not in terms of fixed categories, but in the interests of critical distance.

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