



Culture and Economy After the Cultural Turn

edited by Larry Ray & Andrew Sayer

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Introduction

Larry Ray and Andrew Sayer

The cultural turn

One of the most striking features of social science at the end of twentieth century has been a growth of interest in culture and a turn away from economy. The cultural turn has been especially strong in radical social science and studies of history, including a turn towards discourse and away from materialism and the Marxist-influenced political economy which was so strong in the 1970s and early 1980s (Barrett, 1992). What was previously secondary, merely superstructural, is now primary, and notions of structure are regarded as suspect in many circles. Where previously language reflected material being, it is now treated as itself the 'house of being'. Where previously radicals were concerned with capitalism, they now talk of modernity and postmodernity. Postmodernism itself is overwhelmingly cultural in its concerns, with economics notable by its absence, political economy being presumably tainted by its association with materialism and grand narratives. Nevertheless there are many parallels between postmodernism and the more political-economic discourse of neoliberalism, such as their suspicion of grand narratives/theories and affirmation of local knowledges, their resistance to paternalism and normative discourse (Sayer, 1995). However, the parallels are rarely acknowledged. Such is the dominance of concerns with discourse and difference that even to mention the categories of political economy is to appear hopelessly passé. Yet not even the strongest enthusiasts for cultural studies can deny the continued importance of economic matters, for they are obliged to acknowledge it in their lives even if they ignore it in their writing. As a famous slogan from Bill Clinton's first election campaign put it, the key issue was 'the economy, stupid!'. On the other hand, there are arguments that, despite such slogans, it has actually been the cultural dimension of politics which has been decisive of late.

In this book we present a number of responses to the changing relationship between culture and economy. The collection is motivated

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by curiosity about the reasons for the 'cultural turn' in much social science, and the corresponding decline of interest in (political) economy, plus the paradox of it happening at a time of widening economic divisions and increasing economic problems. It explores the dialectic of culture and economy from a range of standpoints and in relation to substantive topics, in particular concerning politics and workplace culture. It asks whether societies are changing in ways which involve a new relationship between culture and economy. In so doing it provides some insights regarding the connection or lack of connection between the cultural turn in academia and life outside. It also confronts a diverse range of concrete issues, thereby testing more general and abstract claims made about culture, economy and politics. Thus, for example, the question of whether there is a cultural turn in politics is answered in relation to post-communist transition, environmental politics, Britain's New Labour, and the politics of recognition. In engaging with these issues, we hope incidentally to throw new light on debates about post-modernism versus modernism. As the paradox of the turn away from economy and the persistence of economic forces and problems becomes evermore glaring and intolerable, the need for these issues to be addressed grows stronger.

There are many positive effects of the cultural turn – both in taking culture, discourse and subjectivity more seriously and in escaping from reductionist treatments of culture as mere reflection of material situation. Materialist analyses of culture, race and gender had difficulty addressing their discursive content in its own right and acknowledging its relative autonomy from material circumstances. Feminism combined a cultural turn with a psychoanalytic turn, in particular exploring the discourse, subjective experience and meanings associated with gender difference which earlier socialist feminism had inadequately addressed. Consumption has been rescued from the often dismissive and negative treatment it received at the hands of Marxists. Post-colonial literature has looked beyond economic imperialism to illuminate the pervasive effects of cultural imperialism in discourse and the social construction of identities. Where materialist treatments of race and gender could explain their economic effects and implications but not their sources, insofar as these lay in cultural and psychological processes, the cultural turn opened these up to scrutiny.

Why then, has there been a cultural turn? It could be construed as largely endogenous to academia – as simply a stage in the development of academic thought: but it would be surprising if it bore no relation to changes in society, culture and politics at large. In diverse recent works, including Lash and Urry's *Economies of Signs and Space* (1994) and Crook et al.'s *Postmodernization* (1994), it is claimed that contemporary societies have experienced a collapse of the boundaries between economy and culture. Crook et al. argue that culture is gaining the effectivity once ascribed to material relations. These ideas are part of a wider movement

in the social sciences, resonating with concerns such as the aestheticization of everyday life and the shift from material to symbolic consumption. It links up too with a considerable amount of work on postmodernism. Such claims about 'culturalization' challenge classical formulations of the problem, which presupposed culture and economy as mutually interacting, but separate, institutional orders.

The cultural turn further coincides with the decline of socialism and the diversification of concerns of radical politics beyond economic questions of distribution to cultural questions of recognition (Fraser, 1995). Research into forms of domination and division that went beyond those deriving from capital and class was long overdue. In academic circles, the growth of feminism and research on ethnicity helped raise awareness of the dangers of class reductionism and of how the pursuit of equality could invoke a spurious universalism, which actually masked particularism and suppressed difference. However, outside academia, declining concern with equality has arguably less to do with postmodernism and more to do with the rise of neoliberalism and individualism, and the decline of the Keynesian welfare state. Politics has become more pluralist; yet, as Gregor McLennan (1995) observes, where radical social scientists previously used to dismiss pluralism by arguing that it dealt merely with appearances and failed to see the force of the underlying structures of capitalism, many have now turned pluralist themselves. This is apparent in their insistence on de-differentiation and the primacy of difference, even if they prefer not to acknowledge the similarities to the older pluralism and indeed to liberalism.

Yet the cultural turn is more puzzling in relation to the continuing prominence of economic matters in everyday life and mainstream politics – unless it is simply a sign of academic ghettoization, in which the social and ideological distance between the more abstruse postmodernist theory and popular discourse is huge. One interpretation of the paradox is that the new fronts on which radicals now work, together with postmodernism's textual radicalism, have allowed radical academics to maintain their radicalism, and indeed even to outdo the old New Left, without having to make any painful concessions to the ascendant New Right (Eagleton, 1995; Sayer, 1995). As we have already noted, the irony of this is that there are striking affinities as well as differences between postmodernism and liberalism, concealed by the contrast between the cultural character of the former and the overwhelmingly political and economic character of the latter.

In the case of feminism, it is not clear why the cultural turn should have been accompanied by such a marked decline in interest in economic aspects of gender. It is not explained by the fact that men dominate political economy, for that is what has to be explained, and in any case, 1970s socialist feminism did take economy seriously. Moreover, given that women suffer more than men from economic problems one might have expected larger numbers of women to have

moved into the study of political economy. A relatively small number of feminist researchers continue to work on economy (e.g. Folbre, 1992; Nelson, 1996; Jackson and Pearson, 1998). But as Harriet Bradley and Steve Fenton note in this volume, they tend to have been absorbed into mainstream social studies and have not been seen as part of the vanguard of feminist theory, which is overwhelmingly cultural in focus.

In these and other cases, there are intriguing shifts in the relationships between culture and economy and in the approaches to them. In what follows we begin by discussing the basic terms of the debate, whether the culture–economy distinction is tenable, and what its political significance might be. We then review possible changes in the relationship between culture and economy in terms of the social and cultural embeddedness of economic activities, in consumption, in workplace culture and, at greater length, with regard to politics.

Defining ‘culture’ and ‘economy’

There is little doubt that arguments about an increasingly close relationship between economy and culture can point to processes which, if not entirely new, are growing. Some authors have even argued that the distinction is no longer tenable (e.g. Hall, 1988; Jameson, 1990; Lash, 1990). In the discussions which preceded this volume, our attempts to define and distinguish culture and economy often met with scepticism, though no one offered an alternative way of making the distinction. Significantly, those who have expressed scepticism about the distinction are unable to stop referring to the cultural and the economic separately, which suggests that we actually still need it. We would argue that there are still crucial differences between culture and economy, and that it is politically as well as theoretically important to understand them. ‘Culture’ and ‘economy’ are not synonyms. If they were, we could interchange them without causing any problems – for example, ‘Cultural Studies’ courses could be renamed ‘Economic Studies’, and vice versa, and no one would be misled. Since they certainly *would* be misled, ‘culture’ and ‘economy’ must be different, and hence it ought to be possible to say what the difference is. Yet neither are they antonyms, and neither do they refer to separable ‘spheres’ of social life. Furthermore, since the basic terms have several meanings, there may be more than one culture–economy distinction. Our contributors have differing views on the distinction, but here we set out one version of it as an invitation or provocation to further debate.

As Raymond Williams famously demonstrated, ‘culture’ is formidably polysemic (Williams, 1958). The ‘anthropological’ definition of culture (used, at times by Williams himself) as a ‘whole way of life’, is too broad to succeed in distinguishing anything. If this is what culture is, then of course economy must already be included in it. Often,

however, one finds that it isn't: the danger is that appealing to this definition allows authors to pass off what are actually selective accounts – ignoring economy – as if they were inclusive (Hall, 1997), thereby engaging in a kind of cultural or anthropological imperialism. Arguably, this is what has happened in the cultural turn. Attempts to drop the distinction merely allow culture to swamp economy, reducing the latter to a simplistic and highly questionable grand narrative about 'Fordism and post-Fordism', whose understanding, as Eagleton notes, requires less economic knowledge than is needed for reading the financial pages of the newspapers. Yet the narrower sense of culture noted by Williams as 'artistic and intellectual activities' now seems to carry connotations of high culture and needs broadening to include popular cultural activities of sport and entertainment, fashion and advertising. It is culture in this sense that is the primary focus of Russell Keat's contribution to this collection. In this respect, as Williams noted, there is some convergence towards the broader, anthropological definition of culture (Williams, 1977).

Common to all uses of 'culture' is a concern with practices and relationships to which meanings, symbols or representations are central: in short, 'signifying practices'. These patterns give meaning to, and orient social behaviour, within particular groups. Since any and every social act can be a signifying practice, culture is everywhere. However, this does not mean that culture is everything, that the only thing that goes on in society is signifying practice, or that the signifying aspects of practices and artefacts exhaust all we need know about them. Things also happen to people regardless of discourses or the level of meaning, and the effects of the formal economy are particularly important in this respect.

Although they are hardly ever constructed under egalitarian conditions, cultural phenomena must in some sense be shared, even if they are contested; they cannot simply be imposed. This is because the realm of meaning is at least immanently dialogical. As critical theorists have argued, even where there are attempts to impose meanings, the processes of communication cannot reduce wholly to monologic transmission, and the same must go for culture (Williams, 1958; Lash and Urry, 1994).

A crucial feature of many of the goals or goods associated with culture is that they are primarily internal (Sayer, 1997). For example, the elderly or a certain kind of music might be valued, but this respect or value is not accorded merely in order to achieve some external goal, but because the elderly or that kind of music are valued in themselves.¹ In saying that these values are intrinsic we do not mean that the objects are beautiful or good in themselves, independently of a subject or of discourse, for value is always relational. By intrinsic we merely mean non-instrumental. Although some things – such as a BMW – may sometimes be valued as a means to an end, often of distinguishing ourselves from

others, they may also be valued for their own particular qualities. Sometimes their function as signifier of distinction may be conditional on their intrinsic qualities; the BMW would not be a source of prestige for its owner if it were unreliable and awful to drive.

Cultural norms and values regarding actions are, at least in part, judged as good or bad in themselves rather than purely in terms of their consequences. However, while stressing the normative, moral element within cultures, it is important not to idealize them, since some norms may actually be repressive. The intrinsic values of sexism and racism are cases in point. The relationship between culture and economy should therefore not be coded: culture (good), economy (bad).

By contrast, economic activities and processes involve a primarily instrumental orientation; they are ultimately a means to an end, satisfying external goals to do with provisioning. Economic work may of course be satisfying in itself as well as a means to an end, and while this is obviously desirable, the work itself is rarely more important than its product, be it material production or interpersonal work such as child-care. The needs which the economy provides for include not merely transhistorical physical needs but ones which are social, aesthetic and geohistorically-specific, such as beer-drinking or wearing jeans, and even the transhistorical or species-wide needs are always met in culturally specific ways. Economic activities are always culturally inflected or 'embedded' (Granovetter, 1985). There is no way in which they could be conducted independently of systems of meanings and norms. 'The economy' is as much a cultural site as any other part of society, such as the family, community or school, but while mainstream economists abstract from the cultural side, political economists and institutional economists have been increasingly willing to consider both.

The form of the union of the economic and the cultural is almost certainly changing but since there has always been some such union, despite their different logics, we are looking at a transhistorical, rather than a postmodern, phenomenon. However, this does not imply that the distinction between the economic and cultural is untenable. To speak of a unity does not preclude the possibility that culture and economy may follow separate logics of development. Following Weber's concept of differentiated value spheres, for example, Habermas offers a multi-dimensional theory of social change in which the economy and culture represent two different dimensions of social learning that are nonetheless dependent on one another (e.g. Habermas, 1979: 152ff; Ray, 1993: 38–46). The meaningful aspects of activities, artifacts and relationships, whose value is primarily internal, are combined in various ways with instrumental activities directed towards the external goal of reproduction of social life. But this combination does not undermine the distinction itself. Moreover, while all economic activities have a cultural dimension, the converse does not apply, for not all cultural activities are directed to provisioning – watching a television programme, for example, is not an

economic activity. That such cultural activities do not escape economic implications (the television must be produced) doesn't make them in any meaningful sense economic. The relationship between culture and economy is therefore asymmetric. Counselling a friend who has problems and offering counselling services for money as a way of making a living are both cultural activities insofar as they involve meanings and representations, but only the second is economic too, for the first does not serve as a means of making a living. The existence of activities such as this which are simultaneously economic and cultural does not mean that the distinction is no longer valid, for it is primarily about logics and purposes of action rather than about different spheres of everyday life.²

This association of the cultural and the economic implies that it is wrong to think of the relation between them as simply external. A question like 'How has the economy been influenced by culture?' implies that there was first a pristine economy which somehow later fell under the influence of culture, when of course economic activities have always been culturally influenced.³ It also ignores those economic activities which take place outside the formal economy, for example in households. Neoclassical economists tend to assume that 'culture' need only be invoked where motivations diverge from self-interest, but as the classical economists realized and historians have documented, the pursuit of self-interest and associated moral sentiments and social norms are themselves a cultural development associated with the rise of modernity and capitalism. On the other hand, this doesn't make the question meaningless, for if one is talking purely about the formal economy, then at least some cultural influences are indeed external to it. Nor does the fact that economies are always culturally inflected mean that there cannot be tensions rather than harmony between culture and economy. At times, the logic of one may dominate the other, as when cultural practices are subordinated to economic demands. Although it is common in such situations to talk of culture as being threatened, this does not mean that the domain of culture shrinks, merely that one kind of culture gives way to another one.

If we move to a more specific level to consider advanced economies, especially capitalism, then the relationship between economy and culture takes on another form. Here, the part of the economy we call the formal or money economy differentiates out from the lifeworld to become a major social system standing to a certain extent opposed to it and dominating it. The combination of unprecedented degrees of division of labour and knowledge with dependence of economic survival on competition for the spending of often distant and unknown others, and on the movements of 'market forces', makes the influence of individuals over their own life-chances more indirect and uncertain than ever before. This leads to the situation in which we speak more readily of the human problems of economic activities than the economic problems of

humans. What matters is the product and price, and the abstract or formal rationality of exchange-value.⁴

Some authors point to recent developments in capitalism as evidence of a collapse of the culture–economy distinction. The rise of the service sector has been cited as indicating the emergence of a post-industrial society in which traditional material production is becoming secondary to a more strongly culturally inflected service economy. But it is not clear that much has changed here. First, the expansion of services is widely exaggerated since many of the activities classified as service production, such as catering, have a major element of manufacture (Sayer and Walker, 1992). True services involving interpersonal communication, provision of information or ambiance, such as teaching or counselling, do indeed involve stronger cultural elements than material production, and have a dialogical and performative character in which the ‘consumer’ as well as the producer affect the quality of the service. Moreover, in the case of the professions, the work has a normative character insofar as it involves evaluating the situations and behaviour of clients/patients/students and deciding what they need. Yet all these remain activities pursued for economic reward and subject to economic constraints. Further, alongside the expansion of non-material commodities in the form of service work proper, the wealth of material commodities continues to expand relentlessly, even though fewer people are involved in making them. Thus the air hostess’s smile presupposes planes, in-flight meals, baggage handling systems, radar and airports and the hundreds of thousands of material components that go into them.

Another line of argument popular amongst cultural analysts takes up Baudrillard’s emphasis of the growing importance of the ‘sign value’ of commodities, that is their symbolic significance as means by which lifestyles and identities can be constructed. While this aestheticization is probably increasing in consumer products, two things have to be remembered. First, sign value has certainly not replaced exchange value as the regulator of economic activity in capitalism – company accounts or bank balances are not assessed in sign value! Secondly, the majority of commodities in a modern economy are not consumer commodities but intermediate products like oil, computer chips or bearings, which do not need to be aestheticized, even if some of them do end up in consumer products.

A stronger argument for a fusion of culture and economy could be drawn from Bourdieu, who analyses culture as having an economic logic (1977; 1986). Bourdieu sees almost every act either in instrumental, indeed explicitly economic terms, or as barely conscious products of the habitus. In the former case the pursuit of honour or status, expressions of goodwill and especially gift-giving are seen as disguised strategies of exchange through which symbolic, social or cultural capital are accumulated. Both interpretations are indeed illuminating for a wide

range of actions, both for pre-capitalist and capitalist societies, but not all actions are purely instrumental or subconscious; some – particularly actions in response to moral dilemmas – are done for their own sake, and on the basis of deliberation (Sayer, this volume).

So, in summary, we can agree with Stuart Hall that culture is not ‘a decorative addendum to the “hard world” of production and things, the icing on the cake of the material world’ and that ‘through design, technology and styling, “aesthetics” has already penetrated the world of modern production’. But it doesn’t follow from this that the distinction between the economic and cultural ‘is now quite useless’, as he once claimed (Hall, 1988), since, as we noted, such authors cannot avoid continuing to use it, which Hall now seems to acknowledge (Hall, 1997). Similarly we accept that ‘the economy is increasingly culturally inflected and . . . culture is more and more economically inflected’ (Lash and Urry, 1994: 64). But despite the inflections, economic and cultural logics remain different and often pull in opposite directions.

Evaluating economic influences upon cultures

We claimed earlier that the culture–economy distinction is not only theoretically important but matters politically. Why might this be? Here there is a striking divergence between modernist and postmodernist thinkers. Many of the former have seen culture and economy in a destructive (rather than creative) tension, and have been concerned about both the dominance of an economic logic oriented to accumulation in capitalism and industrialism and the abstraction or disembedding of economy within society. By contrast, postmodernists have had a much more sanguine view of the matter and regard the modernist critiques as infected by elitism and an implicit productionism (Ferguson and Golding, 1997).

Critical theorists have highlighted the dangers of the expansion of the sphere of instrumental reason at the expense of practical reason and the risk of devaluation of substantive values. As the range of commodities grows, ‘the imperialism of instrumental reason threatens the immanently dialogical qualities of cultural values’ (Lash and Urry, 1994: 83). Actions then become judged not according to substantive values but according to whether they are profitable. Individuals are positioned as consumers rather than citizens, moral and political issues are displaced by market decisions according to self-interest, and the public good is steadily corroded. Non-monetized versions of this distortion of values are possible too, where, to use Adam Smith’s terms, love of display and praise is given priority over love of praiseworthy acts. As John O’Neill’s chapter shows, the ‘good life’ is defined in terms of fame, appearance and riches (or cultural, symbolic and social capital, in Bourdieu’s terms), rather than in terms of virtue (Smith, 1759). In Lash and Urry’s terms,

aesthetic, taste categories take the place of moral-practical values in the assessment of actions and ways of life (Lash and Urry, 1994: 133).

This last line of critique implies that celebrating – or even just uncritically reporting – the sign value of cultural practices, relations and products, forms of consumption, and lifestyles, or ‘the stylization of life’ as Bourdieu (1986) and Featherstone (1994) call it, is complicit in the very erosion of cultural values that capitalism and industrialism have brought about. If culture, as an object of study, is treated as no more than the stylization of life, then arguably this is worse, since it ignores the possibility of another side to culture more directly to do with social relations and virtue. For critical theorists and a long line of other philosophers and political economists, if this is actually happening in the modern world, then we are in trouble. While dominant conceptions of culture differ by country and discipline, it is no accident (as Marxists used to say) that this impoverished concept of culture is to be found in the most economically and politically liberal societies. Equally, it is no accident that in more social democratic societies, such as Scandinavia, where there is a stronger sense of the public or the common, a more anthropological and moral-political way of understanding culture, going beyond the stylization of life, is still strong.

On the other side, not only postmodernists but also many liberals argue that this kind of critique is elitist and dogmatic. It fails to recognize the ‘civilizing effects’ of market relations. It implies the dubious assumption that in the absence of capitalism’s imperatives, benign cultural norms and forms would automatically prevail. It is one-sided and undialectical in allowing a concern with the status of many cultural activities and products as commodities and sources of profit to obscure the way in which material consumption can be creative and enabling. It is anti-liberal in implying that individuals do not know what is in their best interest, and it ignores the way markets allow people to pursue their own conceptions of the good life by buying and selling as they choose. It implies an elitist distinction between high and low culture and a right to pass judgement on the tastes of others. It dogmatically and ethnocentrically proclaims as universal and foundational, normative principles which are actually local, particular, and without any ultimate foundation. Its anti-consumerism reflects the elitism and asceticism of intellectuals, and derives from the fact that they have so much cultural capital that they do not need to seek prestige through consumption, or perhaps from their lack of awareness of just how much they consume themselves. Worse, and unforgivably, they are too unreflexive to realize that they are treating their own special interests as universal. On this view, the expansion and diversification of commodity production also contributes to the expansion of civil society and the diversification of social worlds in which ordinary people live, thereby expanding the positionalities and identities available to them, or at least to those with sufficient income (Hall, 1988).

Furthermore, both liberals and postmodernists might argue that far from devaluing cultural goods, markets for them may oblige cultural producers to raise their standards so as to survive against competitors. Critical theory and Marxism are biased against consumption, failing to appreciate that it can be active and creative, and hence a source of cultural innovation. The extraordinary explosion in the number of commodities noted in the first sentence of Marx's *Capital* signals an unprecedented unleashing of creativity, and not only on the producers' side. Just as cheap commodities break down 'all Chinese Walls', they break the isolation ('rural idiocy') of closed societies and bring about an ever-wider cosmopolitanism in which cultural cross-fertilization and enrichment can take place. They bring hitherto unknown or inaccessible goods within the reach of the pockets of the majority.⁵ The resulting hybridization of culture replaces a world of non-relational diversity with one of interdependence and difference, and is to be celebrated. In the process, market forces provide the means by which people can develop new identities and cultural forms. Postmodernism's relativistic leanings can be realized in the neutrality of markets:

capital has fallen in love with difference: advertising thrives on selling us things that will enhance our uniqueness and individuality. It's no longer about keeping up with the Joneses, it's about being different from them . . . cultural difference sells. This is the 'difference' of commodity relations, the particular experience of time and space produced by transnational capital. In the commodification of language and culture, objects and images are torn free of their original referents and their meanings become a spectacle open to almost infinite translation. Difference ceases to threaten, or to signify power relations. (Rutherford, 1990: 11)

While few would disagree that transnational capital has a disembedding effect on cultural objects and images, many would demur at this upbeat view of deracination and commodification, and of course one can point to the continued lack of differentiation of many of the most popular commodities. Others, including Stuart Hall (1990), who discusses identity and cultural diaspora in the same volume, would argue that difference can most definitely involve oppressive power relations, indeed this is what the politics of recognition is centrally about. Of course, these are just the briefest summaries of the arguments and there are clearly many possibilities for accepting and combining points from both sides, but sketching them in this manner should be sufficient to indicate something of the political and moral significance of the relationship between economy and culture.

Culture and economy: moral-political dimensions

One of the most striking political aspects of the relationship between culture and economy concerns the relationship between the politics of

recognition and the politics of distribution. The former, concerning claims for recognition of the distinctive perspectives and values of ethnic, gender and sexual differences, have become particularly salient in recent times, sometimes overshadowing the politics of the distribution of resources. Our first contributor, Nancy Fraser, follows up her seminal earlier work on these matters (Fraser, 1995) with a discussion of their implications for normative questions of social justice. Proponents of the politics of recognition often neglect egalitarian redistribution or see it as falsely universalizing dominant groups' norms at the expense of other norms, such as those of male breadwinners or heterosexuals. On the other hand, proponents of the politics of redistribution often see identity politics as a diversion from the 'real' economic issues, and one which allows the powerless to be divided and ruled. Nancy Fraser rejects such either/or positions and argues that both kinds of politics cut across all social movements, be they centred on class, gender, ethnicity or sexuality. Approaching the politics of recognition via a Weberian concept of status groups, she develops an analysis of the intricate relationships between economic and cultural differences, and indeed between the concepts of economy and culture. This provides a basis for a 'bivalent theory of justice' which combines redistribution and recognition in a single comprehensive paradigm. Rather than seeing redistribution and recognition as referring to two substantive societal domains – economy and culture – a 'perspectival dualism' is proposed which treats them as two analytical perspectives that can be applied to any domain, exposing the complex imbrication of economy and culture. Thus egalitarian economic redistribution cannot be achieved without changing patterns of cultural value which code genders, ethnicities and sexualities hierarchically, and vice versa.

Central to the question of the moral-political significance of relationships between culture and economy is that of the nature and role of moral-political values themselves. Andrew Sayer argues that contemporary approaches to the study of both culture and economy are ill-equipped to grasp their significance. The tendency of the former to reduce culture to the stylization of life is complicit in the aestheticization of moral-political values, or the de-moralization of culture. The expulsion of consideration of questions of morality from political economy, reflecting the disembedding of the formal economy, weakens both its explanations and critiques of contemporary economic life. In both areas there is a tendency to ignore moral influences on social life, usually by interpreting them either as merely subjective and emotive or in instrumental, power-based terms, as in Bourdieu's 'strategies of distinction'. In order to counter these tendencies, a new version of the concept of moral economy is proposed in order to highlight the ways in which all economic activities – both formal and informal or domestic – are influenced by norms, including ethical principles. Who should work (paid or unpaid)?; who is our keeper and whose keeper are we? These are among

the key questions to which these norms provide answers. While the norms regulate the political economy, they are always also adapted to it and to some degree compromised by it, indeed they may be partly a rationalization of the political economic order. Two aspects of the post-war moral economy are now changing – its strongly gendered character and its institutionalization in the welfare state. These are being destabilized from two directions – from changes in civil society, particularly involving the new ‘life politics’ and families, and by changes in the formal economy.

According to John O’Neill, questions of identity and recognition are not new but have a long history in classical political economy. However, what is different now is the denial of a series of normative distinctions which classical political economy used to make an important critique of market society. Moreover, whereas the cultural turn is associated with a turn away from political economy, it arguably endorses neoliberal values and is convergent with the latter’s defence of markets, especially where identity depends on consumption and images, or vanity, as older theorists termed it, rather than on some independent good such as achievement. Whereas the older critique attacked the way in which markets encourage strategic behaviour and the cultivation of appearance and credibility and undermine any independent standards regarding what is worthy of praise or recognition, the cultural turn elides such distinctions and neutralizes the critique. The same goes for recent sociology of science. A further consequence of the divorce of concerns with cultural recognition from issues of economic distribution is the loss of the argument that equality in economic and social standing is a condition for proper appraisals of differences of worth.

Russell Keat develops a different and novel kind of critique of the commodification of culture in relation to markets and their limitation. While he accepts that markets should be allowed wherever they enhance human well-being, this will only happen if consumers are able to make good judgements about what will contribute to their well-being. Here, *non-market* institutions are required to enable people to make good judgements about the use-value of practices and hence about commodities related to them. Certain important cultural ‘products’ themselves explore the nature and possibilities of human well-being, helping us to evaluate different ways of life. By contrast, the instrumental character of assessments of this generated within markets through advertising are unreliable, increasingly producing a spurious culturalization of commodities: for example, implying that purchase of a certain product will bring us sociability and happiness.

Economy and culture: class and difference

The cultural turn from materialism to discourse (Barrett and Phillips, 1992) brought not only a change in approach but in primary objects of

study. Approaches suitable for understanding economic systems are inappropriate for understanding discursive processes, and vice versa, with the result that each side either ignores or misunderstands those phenomena inaccessible to its approach. One of the contributory factors in the shift from economy to culture was the realization that most non-class social divisions could not be explained on the model of class. But the converse is also true: class cannot be understood in the terms appropriate for gender, ethnicity or sexuality. Whereas the class divisions of capitalism – in the sense of differences of income and wealth rather than ‘subjective’ class culture – have no *necessary* connection to ascribed or actual characteristics of particular groups, non-class divisions such as those of gender and ethnicity and sexualities obviously do. Class differences are hierarchical; they are not differences to be accepted or celebrated; they are not discursively produced and performative (Coole, 1996). Where consumers do not know who makes the commodities they buy, their decisions and the repercussions these have on the incomes of producers, cannot derive from culturally ascribed characteristics. In this respect, the formal economy is identity-blind. This ‘indifference to persons’, a function of the disembedding of modern economies, is a crucial, indeed defining feature of systems such as capitalism. This is so, even though in many other respects, such as employment, the systems are clearly gendered and differentiated according to ethnicity in their concrete form.

There may, however, be a contingent relation between non-class divisions and class in the above sense, where certain identifiable groups may be pressed into particular classes and occupations by virtue of their cultural characteristics. Such grounds are always spurious, for even if the ascribed characteristics of a particular group are favourable to the occupancy of particular class positions, there are usually others who would be able to take their places; economic systems may be embedded in ways which are responsive to cultural difference, for example, but they are not utterly dependent on this form of embedding.⁶ For a while, some variants of Marxist feminism tried to argue that capitalism depended on unpaid female domestic work, but the reasons why it is overwhelmingly women rather than men who do this work have nothing to do with capitalism, and there is no reason why class and capital accumulation could not exist in a differently gendered or non-patriarchal society. Gender and ethnic divisions are not restricted to life outside the economic system but are found within it too, but it does not follow from this that the system of capital is dependent on them, even though competitive pressures may encourage their exploitation where they exist (Sayer, 1995). In the abstract, we can identify or isolate capitalism as a system whose survival is not dependent on gender, ethnic or other differences, but its concrete practices are usually gendered. A dual systems theory such as that developed by Walby (1986; 1997), which allows for conflicts as well as compatibilities between capitalism and patriarchy or other culturally ascribed divisions, is therefore appropriate.

It must be stressed again that these arguments about class concern its objective dimensions in terms of individuals' incomes and access to resources. Matters are different regarding the subjective experience of class, for this is always mediated by gender and ethnicity (Skeggs, 1997). While this is true, the danger of considering class exclusively at the level of subjective experience and discourse is that we may ignore the way in which the system of the formal economy shapes and differentiates actors' material circumstances without any necessary regard for their identities (though as we have noted it may contingently respond to them). The turn to culture and discourse illuminates the former, but occludes or misrepresents the latter.

While the logic of the formal economy does not require culturally-ascribed differences, it is a major error to suppose that all economic problems derive from within the formal economic system. A significant proportion of economic activity takes place outside it, particularly in the domestic economy, and many of the most serious economic problems are cultural in origin, deriving from the way in which individuals' economic activities and obligations are ascribed to them. Thus, one of the main causes of female poverty lies in cultural restrictions on the entry of women into the public sphere, especially the labour market. For example, certain widows and their children in India and Bangladesh are at risk from starvation even though such women are capable of going out and earning a wage, because patriarchal pressures prohibit them from leaving the home (Nussbaum and Glover, 1995). The gendered household division of labour is itself a consequence of signifying practices rather than system demands. The allocation of particular economic roles to men and women is a major feature of the constitution of gender. As Nancy Fraser puts it, political collectivities based on gender (and also ethnicity) are 'bivalent' in that they are concerned with both the economic politics of distribution and the cultural politics of recognition, and injustices with respect to the one are reinforced by injustices with respect to the other.

Whereas political economy largely neglected the cultural determinants of economic problems, the cultural turn has produced a neglect of the systemic origins of economic problems (although arguably it has not paid much attention to culturally determined economic problems either). The realization that gender differences have cultural-psychological determinants rather than economic determinants helps to explain why an economic (Marxist) feminist research gave way to a highly cultural feminism in the 1980s. Just as Marxism dismissed social divisions it could not assimilate to the model of class, so much of postmodernist cultural studies dismisses class difference as it cannot be assimilated to its models of difference. However, one-sided, either-or thinking is not inevitable, and as Harriet Bradley and Steve Fenton argue, it is possible to grasp the dialectic of these two forms of difference in order to understand concrete societies. As they observe, the recent history of sociological research on

both gender and ethnicity is one of a shift from political economic standpoints which grossly underplayed identity and meaning to a focus on culture, identity and difference in which class, as Michele Barrett famously noted, is now 'non grata'. Bradley and Fenton argue for reconciliation and draw upon their own respective researches on gender and ethnicity to propose how it might be done in practice. Thus they illustrate the changing dialectic of culture and economy with respect to Quebec nationalism and French Canadian ethnicity and to Madonna's commodification of her sexuality. As they show, such a reconciliation has far-reaching implications for sociological theory and methodology.

'Economizing culture' or 'culturizing economy'?: capitalism and work culture

Even if the balance between culture and economy is changing, it is possible to understand the *direction* of this change in quite opposed ways. To begin with, there is the insight that money and markets have to be culturally embedded in various ways, an argument used now in opposition to neoclassical economics' 'under-socialized' conception of actors. Thus sociologists and political economists have emphasized how economic life is embedded in cultural forms. One example of this is the current interest in trust as a precondition for economic performance (e.g. Luhmann, 1979; Misztal, 1996). However, these arguments are not in themselves new. Adam Smith's theory of market behaviour presupposed the existence of internalized moral regulation. Durkheim's concern with the moral basis of contract is well known. More recently Parsons posited a process of multidimensional adaptive upgrading from material determination in which the symbol became crucial to social reproduction. Here social differentiation creates expanding social space mediated by differentiated cultural value spheres. Karl Polanyi argued that abstract instrumental exchanges are culturally embedded in normative and institutional frameworks, a process Weber described as *Vergesellschaftung* ('societalization'). Thus, although the relationship between culture and economy may have changed, traditional approaches, analysing the cultural preconditions for different forms of economic organization, may still be useful.

A novel and stronger claim here is that economic life is becoming 'culturalized' in a more fundamental sense. This is claimed in relation to work culture, which some firms attempt to mould, in order to improve company performance. Although this elevates the place of culture, it is clearly an attempt to instrumentalize culture for economic ends. In such cases, the tension noted earlier between cultural values which are largely intrinsic or non-instrumental and instrumental economic rationales is likely to be sharp. Motivating people in purely instrumental ways – 'do this and there will be a pay-off' – may sometimes be successful on its

own, but arguably, external goals such as profit can be attained more effectively by harnessing cultural norms. To take an optimistic view, the more liberal economies may be suffering not from having overestimated the importance of market ends in economic success, but from having underestimated the possibilities of more dialogical forms of organization as means for meeting those ends. Sometimes the instrumentalization of values is completely transparent, as in exhortations to salespersons to believe in their products, but often the exhortations appeal to the intrinsic value of particular ways of working with others rather than to the economic consequences. Some instrumentalized cultures are constructed openly, as in 'designer work cultures' (Casey, 1995); others disguise the element of construction and appeal to existing values outside, as in the case of large Japanese companies adopting the rhetoric of family values (Eccleston, 1989). When practices influenced by moral and aesthetic values become means to ends which have nothing to do with the moral, the good or the beautiful, those qualities are arguably degraded or tainted to some degree. The conflict between integrity and personal or corporate gain and the respective rewards they are likely to receive invites cynicism and reaction. Nevertheless, it must be remembered that although new 'Human Resource Management' and the like are introduced for instrumental reasons, they may be better than what preceded them.

The source of many such projects consists in lessons from successful companies, often foreign ones, whose success seems to lie in 'soft' characteristics rather than straightforward technological or cost advantages. This has proved a source of rich pickings for management consultants, who have gone beyond the rhetoric of 'corporate culture' to promoting 'culture management', 'value-driven companies', 'Japanization' and 'designer work cultures' (Smith, 1996). At times, contemporary management science literature almost seems to suggest that economic success automatically flows from a healthy work culture – a view that would surprise many business people as well as social scientists. As Nigel Thrift argues here, capitalism seems to be going through its own cultural turn, evident particularly in the increasing attention attached by business to knowledge, especially within management discourse, as a means for coping with constant change and uncertainty. This extends beyond work culture to growing connections between academia and capitalism. As he puts it, 'the increasing commodification of knowledge has only pointed to the value of knowledge which can't be commodified, and especially to the value of knowledge that cannot be written down and packaged'. Although the emphasis on culture, knowledge and creativity invites the label 'soft capitalism', as Thrift notes it still has its hard material edge in terms of 'downsizing' of workforces, and super-exploitation of managers and key workers.

There is little doubt that the way in which workers and managers communicate and co-operate makes a difference to both the internal

operations and external relations of companies, though of course it is not the only determinant of their success. However, as Paul Thompson and Patricia Findlay note here, there have always been work cultures – often of resistance – and they are not easily changed, so it is not clear how far ‘culture management’ and the like go beyond the level of rhetoric and actually ‘change the people’. Reviewing theoretical and empirical literature relating to work culture, they argue that though speculation has run far ahead of empirical evidence, something is going on, albeit producing effects which are often different from those intended. Significantly, insofar as change programmes are successful, they tend to have more effect on workers’ practice than on their values, usually because surveillance, sanctions and incentives back up exhortations at the level of values, so that ‘behavioural compliance’ may be a better description than cultural change.

Politics and culture

The complexities of the changing dialectic of culture and economy are further evident in politics, where one can find both examples of heightened concern for economic matters, albeit on an increasingly individualized basis, and elements of culturalization. As we have suggested, the cultural turn itself possibly reflects a shift from the ‘politics of distribution’ to a new ‘politics of recognition’ which is more cultural in character. The cultural turn in social science could be a reflection of this culturalization of politics, and the desertion of economy a consequence of the defeat of the Left’s alternative economic agenda. No matter how important the economy remains, the scope for progressive change looks greater in more cultural directions where the politics of recognition are prominent.⁷

It is tempting to take the decline of trade union and class politics as an indication of the declining importance of economics in politics, but there are other forms of economic politics. Other kinds of economic division, between the employed and the unemployed, between men and women, home-owners and tenants, are becoming more prominent, and more individualistic concerns have grown. There is also the rise of new social movements, less narrowly economic in their focus. Gender politics includes but goes beyond economic matters. The consequent challenge to the traditional division between public/private has redrawn the map of political contestation, introducing new sites of politicization such as the kitchen and the bedroom. These point to a diversification of the concerns of both mainstream and radical politics, though the decline of a socialist agenda could also be taken as evidence of deradicalization. The loss of interest in economic issues parallels a decline of a particular kind of economic concern within politics – egalitarian redistribution – and its replacement by one of economic management.