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## Book Review: The cultural economy reader

Noel Castree

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# reviews in brief

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**The cultural economy reader.** Edited by Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift. Oxford and Maiden, MA: Blackwell. 2004. 413 pp. £60.00 cloth; £19.99 paper. ISBN: 0 631 234248 cloth; 0 63123 429 2 paper.

The interdisciplinary debate over the relations between culture and economy may no longer be as feverish as it was a few years ago. But within and beyond human geography there remains widespread interest in whether economy and culture are separate but related domains or else no longer distinguishable. Amin and Thrift's reader is an indispensable purchase for those who research and teach on the economy–culture problematic. Its 22 essays represent the wide diversity of viewpoints that have emerged this last decade or so – theoretically, topically and politically. Handsomely produced, the book assembles germinal contributions from across the disciplines. The editors have wisely elected not to top-and-tail the essays, so that all of them retain the substance of the originals. As with any reader, there is convenience in having contributions first published in disparate journals and books drawn together in one volume. But more than this, Amin and Thrift have used their peerless knowledge of the economy–culture literature to make some considered judgements about which essays should command the reader's attention. Most readers will find here contributions they have never read, and perhaps one or two they have never heard of. This fact reflects the considerable literature produced this last decade on economy and culture, and it is to Amin and Thrift's credit that they have been able to parse it into the present volume.

The book opens with an excellent chapter by the editors, offering readers a roadmap through the mountainous literature on economy and culture, as well as explaining the structure of the reader. It is written lucidly and by the end of it readers will feel fairly well equipped to read the subsequent 21 contributions. These contributions are organized into six parts, entitled 'Production', 'Finance and money', 'Regulation', 'Commodity chains', 'Consumption' and, more unexpectedly, 'Economy of passions'. The authors included range from Danny Miller to Celia Lury to Michel Callon to Phil Crang to Angela McRobbie. There really is something in here for everybody, and I think this book should be read by those wishing to know more about the culture–economy debate, as well as those familiar with its main contours.

*The cultural economy reader* not only aims 'to reflect and give coherent voice to' interventions made across the human sciences this last decade. It also aspires, quite rightly, to be 'a ground for further work' (Amin and Thrift, pp. xii, xxvii). That

ground is furnished by the hybrid, unitary term ‘cultural economy’, as the book’s title indicates. As the editors suggest, the culture–economy debate has moved from one about where the line between the cultural and the economic should be drawn, through a more synthetic approach to (in recent times) a debate over whether the two domains are identifiable any more. Amin and Thrift endorse the third view, while acknowledging that it is ‘still struggling to find an exact vocabulary’ (p. xiv). The pity is that the editors’ introduction does not do more to develop that vocabulary, other than noting that it will have to dispense with *a priori* divisions between all the actors and things that we have heretofore placed in the two boxes of culture and economy.

Given that the book is a reader, it is no surprise that it reflects a not always obvious contradiction and weakness of the broad literature it seeks to showcase. I mentioned above the enormous range of work contained in *The cultural economy reader*. This begs the question of whether the notion of ‘cultural economy’ is, analytically speaking, as much of a chaotic conception as the two separate terms it is intended to supersede. Because the term is intended to question the ‘fixity’ of any distinction between economy and culture, it raises the issue of what, precisely, is being captured by the term in any given situation. The phenomena discussed in the book’s six parts are so diverse that one can argue that it is just as arbitrary as it is meaningful to convene them within the same intellectual space. In other words, the ontological variety of the volume’s contents makes one wonder how the editors – and authors – can be sure that ‘cultural economy’ is the focus here. One might – following the editors’ preference for a relational ontology – argue that environment, politics and society are all equally imbricated in the things discussed in this volume. Followed to its bitter end, the critique of the economy–culture distinction must, surely, be applied to *all* distinctions, so that even a neologism like ‘cultural economy’ is deemed inadequate because it brackets out other dimensions of life.

Rather than seeing the move away from the economy–culture distinction as a reflection of a more hybrid world, I think it’s worth heeding David Harvey’s sound advice of 30 years ago (in *Social justice and the city*). ‘We should not’, he said, ‘ask whether concepts, categories and arguments are “true” or “false”. Rather, we should ask what produces them and what they serve to produce.’ I quote Harvey here because it seems to me unproductive to ask whether the sorts of argument put forward by the contributors to this volume are ‘better’ or ‘worse’ attempts to describe, explain and evaluate those things we have hitherto compartmentalized as ‘economy’ and ‘culture’. Instead, I think it’s worth asking: what is the *project* here, and why is it deemed better than previous attempts to understand the same issues? What alternate realities are we enjoined to create as much as to see?

This excellent reader deserves to be on the shelves of many human geographers and many more outside the discipline. It is a significant and useful aid to a field of study and debate that has captured the imagination of numerous workers in the social sciences and humanities. I recommend it highly. Though I have not said much about its pedagogical value, it will be essential reading for undergraduates and postgraduates taking

courses on economy–culture relationships. At the research level, it will be equally invaluable. I dare you not to buy it.

Manchester University

NOEL CASTREE

**Reinventing Eden: the fate of nature in Western culture.** By Carolyn Merchant. New York: Routledge. 2003. 308 pp. \$25.00 paper. ISBN: 0 41593 164 9.

Was Eve of the Bible the first scientist? After all, as Carolyn Merchant remarks in *Reinventing Eden*, Eve's consumption of the forbidden fruit illustrated her 'independent and curious' (p. 23) nature and her preference for knowing the world through empirical observation rather than through God's word alone. The question, inspired by Mark Twain's *The diaries of Adam and Eve*, illustrates the sort of insightful gems that Merchant produces in her ambitious and richly illustrated eco-feminist rethinking of Western culture. She aims to show how Western culture has long conformed to variants of a master narrative of recovery – Eden is lost, – but since the seventeenth century secular society has embarked on the project of 'reinventing' it on a global scale. Shopping malls, theme parks, genetically engineered agricultural products and the Internet are contemporary fruits of this dream. Merchant devotes much of her book to critique: the 'Recovery narrative' has legitimated the dominance of nature, women, the poor and non-white peoples. She concludes by proposing a new narrative for the new century. Her postmodern-influenced 'partnership ethic' rejects the linear logic of traditional narrative while promoting equality between men, women and the natural world.

*Reinventing Eden* offers fresh insights into Western culture and, boldly and constructively, it offers a new master narrative (or set of narratives). However, I doubt that feminist geographers and environmentalists already versed in the white male anthropocentrism of Western culture will find the bulk of Merchant's book – the eco-feminist critique – to be fundamentally surprising or new. Students interested in the technical subject of geography and narrative will not find much here either: Merchant writes only a few simplistic paragraphs on the structure of narrative, defining it as 'an ideal form into which particular bits of content are poured. The form is the organizing principle; the content is the matter' (p. 37). For the purpose of introducing alternative environmental histories to undergraduate and graduate students, however, the book would be an excellent resource.

California State University, Northridge

RONALD A. DAVIDSON

**Putting science in its place: geographies of scientific knowledge.** By David Livingstone. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 2003. 234 pp. \$27.50 cloth. ISBN: 0 22648 722 9.

Scholars have long recognized the importance of history in understanding the social dimensions of science. Biographies of prominent figures and institutional histories of leading disciplines have established historical context as a central supporting theme