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Are Cultural Insights Worthy in Political Economy?

Review of *Cultural Values in Political Economy*, edited by J.P. Singh (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2020, 248 pages, LCCN 2019053659)

Cultural studies and cultural analysis have been on the rise since the dawn of the Cold War, tailoring a field of research that has helped untangle the sources and meanings of not only cultural movements, but also political and economic outcomes. This book is a collective contribution in the field of cultural studies, coordinated by professor J.P. Singh. It brings together scholars from different areas of study to give guidance in the maze that is today's cultural, political, social, and economic situation. The work is interdisciplinary at its core, given the contributor's various backgrounds in different fields of study, such as anthropology, international relations, political science, public affairs and policy, international affairs and other branches of the social sciences. The interdisciplinarity of the entire book shows the way in which culture penetrates all facets of social life, becoming, as Arjun Appadurai suggests in the preface, a mediator between economy and politics.

The volume is divided in two parts, where the first would be a theoretical conceptualization of culture, presenting culture in its dynamic and generative aspect with a focus on the creation of values and interests. The second part of this book would be the practical one, where the conceptualization made in the first part is applied in different social, economic and political instances. The line that divides the book is already blurry because each author gives both practical and theoretical insights regarding the importance of culture in the phenomena analyzed, and also, each theoretical conceptualization is developed with practical applications alongside.

In the introduction, J.P. Singh, professor of international commerce and policy, gives an overview of the entire contribution with an emphasis on the importance of cultural analysis, and the importance of culture as a contributor in the generative process of values, beliefs and

interests. This importance is emphasized especially against the backdrop of economism and economists who try to understand and explain social phenomena by a reduction to economic factors. Simple economic determinism and its advocates seem to be the villain this volume is fighting against, proposing that human interests are part of a complex web of cultural contexts, and in the analysis of culture one can better understand both the origins and the impact of human interests. Cultural analysis seems even more important today, in a globalized society where people from various different backgrounds interact with each other and produce certain outcomes which cannot be restricted only to economy or individual interests, but rather have to be understood more holistically.

The definition of culture that runs throughout the entire volume is similar to the one derived by Stuart Hall from Raymond Williams's *Long Revolution*, one which sees culture as "the sum of the available descriptions through which societies make sense of and reflect their common experiences" (Hall, 2019, p.50), that is to say, as Singh suggests, that "culture allows people to make sense of their lives through practices, narratives, symbolic representations etc." (p.7). It is these meanings that have to be analyzed in the global debates regarding political and social outcomes such as the election of Donald Trump in 2016 and the Brexit in 2020, and many other issues regarding policy making, trade relationships, educational systems, these being only some of the practical aspects analyzed in the present volume.

The book proposes a worldview, according to Singh, through seven main points that put culture at the forefront of social issues: preferences and interests are always embedded in cultural values; that cultural values emerge over the long run and influence transformations of cultural meanings (this displays the dynamism of culture); cultural values narrow or broaden the set of possibilities of political economy outcomes through their distributional and meaning-making effects; according to the fourth cultures replenish and evolve through interactions between different bundles of values; ideological arguments become salient in unstable cultural times; cultural identity is a valid political category but a fraught concept that lacks operational measure; and cultures and cultural identities often include contradictory values. These themes are explored in the volume in order to give an account of culture that could be used in examining social, political and economic life. The authors are careful in their critiques of economism to not fall back on the other extreme, of culturalism, and this is because economic factors are not simply

ruled out, but are integrated in a more complex scheme of meaning and interaction, and culture is not an atomized sphere of meaning, but is present in every social practice.

In the second chapter, author Daniel Hausman develops a critique of the way in which economists exclude culture and cultural influences from their economic models. The specific point of critique regards beliefs and the preference formation of individuals and how the issue with most economic theorists is that they take these beliefs and preferences as something given, ignoring the generative forces behind them, and this ignorance towards the process of belief and preference formation is a real obstacle in offering an accurate analysis of why people make the choices they make. This is a rigid conception of choice, having behind an idea of preference that is given, is a rigid one, since it also assumes a stableness (p.34) of the preference. This is a trivial view of preference, since they are never something given, but they have to be contextualized and located in the social and cultural practices that give rise to them, but if one assumes, as most economists do, that preferences of rational agents are stable, then the model on which choices are analyzed is also a very rigid one and cannot say much about why people act in certain ways and make certain choices. To say that people make certain choices or prefer something is because they prefer that certain thing is nothing else than a circular explanation that leads nowhere.

Choices are a whole web that need to be untangled, and it cannot be done through the economist's way. The choices that people make are a whole generative process that involve beliefs, preferences, and constraints, all of these aspects play a part in one's choice. For example, beliefs, that are culturally embedded have an impact on one's choice, the same goes with preferences, people that are part of different classes in society might develop different preferences towards commodities, and, these preferences themselves are formed through a form of constraint, as mentioned, a person from a working-class family will be constrained to adapt their preferences and make their choices based on income. The tale of choices is a much more complex one, as Hausman sees it, and the economic theories of today fail to grasp this, following the same assumptions of the stable rational agent.

In the third chapter, professor David Thorsby aims to make the distinction between culture in its constituent sense, on the one hand, and culture in its functional sense, on the other hand, and it is through these two lenses of seeing culture that one can assess the value of cultural goods. This chapter also presents itself in a way as a critique of recent works of economists who

exclude culture as a factor in the assessment of values, and who do not make a necessary distinction between economic value and cultural value. The main point is that one cannot accurately analyze the value of a work of art, be that painting, literature, music, in purely economic terms, without acknowledging cultural value. Economic value is not an all-encompassing value and it cannot be applied universally to every good on the market, especially when it comes down to cultural goods, which, as the author suggests, is a product that requires human creativity, it conveys a symbolic meaning and it may contain forms of intellectual property (p.54), and these aspects cannot be assessed only through an economic lens, and so the primacy of the idea of economic values has to be shattered in order to make way for other factors that can give a better account of value. Here culture in the two senses presented above is attentively considered: culture in its constituent sense, that refers to shared knowledge and systems of beliefs, and culture in its functional sense, that is the material manifestation of human action, represented in economic discourse by cultural goods and services (p.48). It is through the understanding of the interplay of these modalities of culture that can lead one to give a meaningful analysis of the value of cultural goods, since cultural goods are products of the functional understanding of culture, as said, the material manifestation of human action, they are judged and valued by the beliefs and systems of meaning that people have or create, and which have to be contextualized themselves. After involving culture in the landscape of valuation, this process seems like a much more complex one, one that cannot simply be swept under the rug economic value, as was the case in the previous chapter, regarding choices and preferences.

In the fourth chapter, Sharon Krause, professor of Political Science, aims to open the path towards a discussion about the possibility of creating new culture of environmental responsibility, a culture that sets itself against the liberal notion of individual responsibility, which due to its simplicity, cannot grasp the intricate ways in which policies and corporate interests create issues of climate crisis that are experienced today.

Human interests are to be found at the core of the possibility of mobilizing people to act in front of the issue of climate change, and that is because caring for the planet in its own terms requires an altruism that is not reliable, the author suggests (p.65). This would mean, that for human interests to be oriented towards issues of climate change, a culture of environmental responsibility has to be developed, since interests and preferences are always embedded in

cultural contexts, as showcased in the second chapter. For this, the author suggests that the liberal notion of individual responsibility is inadequate for the complexities of the issues faced go well beyond individual actions, and, in order to have a more adequate conception of responsibility, the idea of responsibility as liability has to be supplemented by responsibility as accountability (p.69). Responsibility as accountability involves an acknowledgment of the consequences of one's own actions and our place within the whole structure that creates the conditions of possibility for such issues as climate change, and this accountability helps one evaluate his own position and role within the bigger picture of the environmental crisis. But, according to the author, the creation of this new culture requires the right political and social context, so she suggests three conditions to be respected: the first would be the limitations on scale and capacities of economic power; the second, eco-constitutionalism; and the third would be transparency about effects and costs.

According to the author, accountability would involve also an obligation to work for changes in the conditions that form the condition of our harmful effects (p.70). Now this action would have to be taken in order to create the first condition given by the author, that is, limitations on the scale and capacities of economic power, and the target would be the big corporations, whose actions create the most harmful effects on climate. The author shows that a reconstruction of the idea of responsibility is necessary, but this cannot be led back towards individual action, since the contribution of individuals towards climate change is nowhere near that of big corporations, and, the choices and preferences of individuals are always constrained within a field of economic activity.

In the fifth chapter, Miles Kahler tackles the problem of globalization in order to understand the dynamic that is created between the winners and the losers in the game of globalization, this is the dynamic between what he calls cosmopolitans and parochials. The main point is trying to understand people's stances on social, political and economic issues, especially in the context of heavy globalization, where strange political movements rise that cut across the left and right political divide, with individuals and groups advocating for policies that are dissonant in the values behind them, where one example are people who advocate for international trade, but then disagree with policies that benefit immigration.

In this battle between parochials and cosmopolitans, the parochials are those who take an ethnonationalist stance, defined by isolationism and exclusivity, while cosmopolitanism, in contrast, takes a stance of openness towards the other. The first group of people are the losers in the game of globalization, while the second are the winners of this game, or the ones benefiting from it. These social categories are brought in order to have a better understanding of the strange political movements mentioned before, and can explain political attitudes more accurately.

While parochialism is characterized by a negative attitude towards immigration, refugees, multiculturalism and economic equality, the cosmopolitan values are defined, as mentioned before, by an openness towards otherness. In this sense, parochialism is aligned most of the time with far-right movements, as was shown in the Trump election, while cosmopolitanism develops rather more progressive values. Cosmopolitans are usually educated people from the upper-middle class, while parochials are mostly uneducated people from working-class backgrounds, but this class division does not tell the whole story, for there are people who take far-right stances while not being in economic adversity, and this is what the distinction between, it also cuts across simple class division, whilst they are important and a crucial tool, they do not tell the whole story, while parochials and cosmopolitans are more general terms that encompass each a shared set of values and beliefs that can explain more complex political movements.

One issue with this distinction, especially with cosmopolitanism and its normative stance suggested by the author, as values that need to be generated, is that it still looks too much of a general term, and given this generality, it does not really seem to have a concrete political stake, other than openness, but the transition in policies regarding the state of economy; it does not seem to have a lot of say, and this might be what the author suggests at when he says that cosmopolitanism or the values behind it can be instrumentalized, as it is seen especially today, meeting corporate interests.

In the sixth chapter, Steven Livingston, professor of media and public affairs, deals with the problem of access to higher education, and how the limitation that is imposed to this form of education perpetuates class disparities and conditions the certain types of culture and attitudes to be generated. This chapter is a crucial one since it picks up the importance of class analysis in the broader analysis of culture, avoiding to be trapped in simple only in discourses about race and gender, which are favorable for the upper middle class. It turns class toward a central point

of analysis, and at the same time denounces the ideological discourse that eliminates class analysis, “We talk about race in order to avoid talking about class” (p.121).

The issue of class analysis is framed in the context of the American education system and the access people have to higher education, but, before this, the author proceeds to conceptualize a semiotic approach to culture, that emphasizes the constructed meaning assigned by participants to social patterns and behaviors found in society (p.116). With this semiotic approach in mind, the author suggests culture shows up and is best understood in moments of cultural transgression, in the boundary spaces where different cultures interact and overlap with each other, and in this case, the cultural transgression or overlap would be between the working-class students and the upper-middle class students in the context of the university. The issue is that most of the boundary spaces that could create transgressions in helping to understand culture are most of the time policed, and policing, in most cases, not only in this one, is done indirectly, here being performed by the restricted access to higher education for people coming from a working-class background. Consequently, economic conditions determine a cultural isolationism, the working-class having restricted access to education, generate a certain type of attitude, and from this isolationism derives a form of parochialism, as shown in the previous chapter. The impediments that create this restricted access are the neoliberal policies that limit funding which would allow working-class teenagers to apply to a university. The main particularity of this chapter is that it provides outstanding insights on the manner in which cultural studies depict and reflect social classes and advances class disparities an important aspect in the policing of culture and restriction of cultural transgressions.

In the seventh chapter, Kristen Hopewell explores the sources and implications of American exceptionalism in the domain of export credit. The author analyzes two ideological currents that helped raise the belief in American exceptionalism: the first concerns the role that the state plays in the US economy, while the second tackles the source and the extent of American power in the international system (p.138). These two factors are analyzed in the context of the rise of the Tea Party and its conservative policies against international trade. In this context, Hopewell argues that, first, conservative and far right political movements, such as the Tea Party, fail to recognize the importance of state intervention in economic activity, and this is due to the free market fundamentalist ideology that drives these movements. The issue is that

this idea of a free market America is mostly a myth, since state intervention and industrial policy were crucial for the development of American economy, but the ideology of American exceptionalism is one that erases systematically these aspects of American economy, since it would be out of sync with the libertarian conception of freedom they propose. Secondly, conservative campaigns against international policies from which both America and the trade partners would benefit, are based on a “national delusion of exceptionalism” (p.138). This exceptionalism manifests itself in the belief of the superiority of American workers and everything that is produced on American soil. But these views again are there to comfort ideological biases of conservatives, since just looking at the history of slavery in America it is clear that no case of exceptionalism can be made, especially in what counts as economic development. As she points out, the idea that America is always better off in a plain field is false, given the fact that America did not play the economic game on a level field; it was always backed up by its hegemonic power. The Tea Party’s campaign against EXIM is one paradigmatic manifestation of this ideology of American exceptionalism, but not the single one, this belief continues to shape policy making in America to this day; besides of that, we encounter tangential movements such as QAnon. The chapter shows very well how ideological analysis must also be integral to cultural analysis, because it helps in understanding the motivations of political movements.

In the eighth chapter, the political scientist Mark Rozell aims to understand the paradoxical support that religious conservatives have given to Donald Trump in the 2016 election and to show that culture and values are key factors in understanding this triumph, factors that add more layers to the understanding that a only an economic analysis could give. The paradoxical nature of this support by the religious conservatives is given by the fact that Trump is not an individual whose personality could be said to be in sync with the values that evangelical Christians adhere to. The author suggests that it is important to consider both material and cultural factors in analyzing this support that Trump has been given over the years by the religious conservatives. In this case, to accuse them of situational morality (p.158) would not be enough, more has to be said about it, and here culture and values come into play. Trump might not be the perfect candidate for the religious groups, but he opened up the path for a discourse that is suspicious and has a negative attitude towards multiculturalism, globalization and immigration, and it is on the basis of these aspects that the religious conservatives came to

embrace Trump as a political leader. This whole group of people can be identified under the category of parochials, as was presented in the fifth chapter by Miles Kahler, that is, the losers of the game of globalization. As was shown previously, they cannot be identified solely on the basis of economic conditions, but the identification has to be supplemented by the values they share, since not all Trump voters are pertaining to one single class, even if the majority of them are from working-class backgrounds, this shows connections made previously in regard to restricted access to higher education which creates a culture of isolationism and from which derives negative attitudes towards multiculturalism, immigration and other such progressive policies.

In the last chapter, Irene S. Wu offers an analysis of soft power in the context of studying abroad and how this analysis explains international cultural relations. One way to understand soft power is a country's ability to attract foreign students to its universities (p.173), but there are others, such as watching movies produced in different countries whose cultures are radically different and unknown to the audience, this would also be a soft power relationship. Countries that are ranked the highest in the soft power ladder when it comes to locations of study for foreigners are the US and England, and a lot of factors play their role into constituting the soft power of a certain country, and these would be economic conditions, cost of living, the variety in study programs, and others. Surprisingly, the data that the author shows reveals that Malaysia, a country which is rather to be expected to be found at the periphery of this sort of soft power relations, can be found at the center, as a common choice amongst students, and one important factor that plays into constituting this soft power is the reduced cost of living relatively to the kind of education people can get there. The author shows clearly that soft power is a useful category of analysis in trying to explain why students choose to study in certain places, but also artistic related matters, or, matters of culture, and how understanding these cultures through this analysis can open the way to a more dynamic understanding of culture, and also create those boundary spaces of cultural transgression that Steven Livingston talked about in chapter six, and which are needed to be able to understand culture and create an environment of openness towards other cultures.

In a nutshell, this volume is a worthwhile contribution in the field of cultural studies, which presents a broader conception of culture in order to supplement, and not completely eliminate, economic and political analysis. It is an attempt to tackle multiple and

interdisciplinary paths through which the cultural turn can be taken seriously by scholars from economy and politics, and creates many points of connection in analyzing cultural transgression, parochialism and cosmopolitanism that later can be seen as applied to issues such as higher education and the surprising support Trump has been given by the religious conservatives. Consequently, the volume is worthy of being frequented by any researcher that would like to deeply understand what trends and prejudgments we might confront in placing cultural values at the heart of political economy.

References

Hall, Stuart (2019). *Essential Essays* Vol.1, edited by David Morley. Durham and London: Duke University Press.