



HAL
open science

Are Cultural Insights Worthy in Political Economy?

Raul Morosan

► **To cite this version:**

Raul Morosan. Are Cultural Insights Worthy in Political Economy?: Review of Cultural Values in Political Economy, edited by J.P. Singh. 2022. hal-03781767v2

HAL Id: hal-03781767

<https://hal.science/hal-03781767v2>

Preprint submitted on 6 Nov 2022 (v2), last revised 3 Feb 2023 (v3)

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

RAUL MOROȘAN, University of Bucharest, Faculty of Philosophy

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, ISBN 9781503612709, e-book)

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 varying backgrounds of the contributors in fields such as anthropology, international relations, political science, public affairs and policy, international affairs and other branches of the social sciences. The interdisciplinarity of the volume already presents the ways 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, the first one being 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 is a 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 since 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.

It is important to look at this contribution in the field of cultural studies as an overall critique, a reaction, against the tendencies of economism within economic theory. Economism is an attitude within economic theory that tries to analyse, understand, and explain economic phenomena, and sometimes going even beyond economic phenomena, through a model that

incorporates, and has as its centre the rational individual, and for this reason it is associated with neo-classical theories of economy (Brohman, 1995, p.297). It is this focus on the atomized, rational individual, and the exclusion of socio-cultural elements from the analysis that is being put under scrutiny in this volume, while also trying to offer a holistic account for an analysis of social, political and economic phenomena.

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. The book proposes 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 holistically.

The definition of culture that runs throughout the entire volume is similar to the one derived by Stuart Hall from Raymond William'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 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, where culture is not an atomized sphere of meaning, but is present in every social practice.

In the second chapter, Daniel Hausman develops a critique of the way in which economists exclude culture and cultural influences in their economic models. The specific points of critique regard beliefs and preference formation in individual choice making. The main issue

with the economic theories is that they understand both beliefs and preference as something stable and given, that is, they do not have a theory of preference and belief formation. Lacking these theoretical elements, this approach opens the way for a very rigid conception of beliefs and preferences in individual choice making, offering a superficial analysis on why people make the choices they make, be they political, religious, or choices regarding commodity acquisitions, accounting only for what choices people make, not why they make them and what they are conditioned by in making those very choices.

For Hausman, in contrast, the preferences and beliefs that play into choice making are neither given, nor stable, rather, there is always a generative process behind beliefs and preferences, and if one is to offer an adequate analysis of choice making, one has to account for this generative process, that is, taking into account cultural, social, and material influences that determine preference formation.

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 ways of understanding 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 it 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).

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 cultures 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.

The author's main point is that the idea of responsibility has to be supplemented with accountability. 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. But, according to the author, the creation of this new culture of environmental responsibility 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, or obligation to work 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. The issue with the configuration proposed is its circularity, for it says that accountability would be an obligation to work in changing the conditions, but responsibility as accountability already assumes a change in the environmental culture, for it is something achieved through this change in culture.

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. 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 which share dissonant values, and can explain political attitudes more accurately.

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 the other way around. Hausman's distinction cuts across these simple class division, which nevertheless, are still an important tool, they do not tell the whole story, while parochials and cosmopolitans are more general terms that each encompass 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 a discourse of openness, which seems too vague, and leads one to think only of cultural politics, and not of class politics, which leads into the next issue of the distinction, that it seems, by the way of its instrumentalization for corporate interests, which is admitted by the author, not to supplement, but to erase class politics, which is the theme of the next chapter.

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 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 that 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.

In the seventh chapter, Kristen Hopewell, offers an analysis of the ideology of American exceptionalism and the way it offers a distorted, and systematically falsified view of the American economic landscape. For Hopewell, American exceptionalism benefits conservative and far right movements and policy making through generating an American past that was never there in the first place, a past which negates state intervention in economic activity, and which fuels the belief in a libertarian American economy. As she clearly shows, one can demystify this American exceptionalism regarding economic growth by looking at the importance that industrial policies played in the economic development of America. Another area in which this demystification can proceed is simply looking at the history of slavery in America, which played a crucial role in the development of the American economic empire. One just needs to look at historical facts in order to see the myth that is American exceptionalism. Hopewell’s analysis binds pretty well with the parochial-cosmopolitan distinction, where the ideology of exceptionalism is being fed to parochial communities, something that can be easily seen in the populism of Donald Trump.

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 than what an economic analysis could give. The paradoxical nature of this support by the religious conservatives is given by the incongruity between Trump's chaotic personality and the values of evangelical Christians. 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. 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. Soft power can be understood as the influence that one country is able to exert in order to attract foreign students, and this influence ranges from academic history that a certain country or city has, its industry of cultural production and its economic conditions. All of these elements play a key role in the constitution of a country's soft power. What is important about soft power, and this is a return to Livingston's idea, is that it can create those boundary spaces of cultural transgression, which are needed for an understanding of culture and an environment of openness, but an openness that takes into consideration social classes, not only different 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 builds up a coherent whole, where every part can be related to each other in the analysis of 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 prejudices 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.

John Brohman (1995) *Economism and critical silences in development studies: A theoretical critique of neoliberalism*, *Third World Quarterly*, 16:2, 297-318