

## **‘Never mind the economy. Here’s culture.’ Economic geography goes punk.<sup>1</sup>**

Culture is not ‘a decorative addendum to the “hard world” of production and things, the icing on the cake of the material world’ Hall (1988)

‘It is possible to argue that economic geographers have become some of the leading exponents of cultural geography’ Thrift (2000a: 692).

‘... punk became real culture ... [making] ordinary social life seem like a trick, the result of sado-masochistic economics’ Marcus (1989: 69).

### **Introduction**

I got the Sex Pistol’s album ‘Never mind the bollocks. Here’s the sex pistols’ the first day it was for sale in October 1977. I bought it at the HMV store on Oxford Street in London. It came in plain brown wrapping to prevent upright Londoners from swooning at the sight of vulgar language. Two tracks from it were in effect banned by the BBC and other radio stations (although John Peel played them), the Pistols’ contribution to the Queen’s Silver Jubilee celebrations, ‘God Save the Queen,’ and their demonic version of national political analysis, ‘Anarchy in the UK’. I never saw them perform live, but watched them on TV throw around chairs as well as four-letter words on Bill Grundy’s LTV Today programme, listened to my conservative (and Conservative) aunts with whom I lived tell me that they were an ‘abomination’ and ‘disgrace’ (and which consequently immensely magnified them in my estimation), and walked with my friends on a Saturday afternoon down Kings Road, Chelsea, outwardly sneering at the punk fashion scene around me and which the Pistols exemplified – ripped jeans and t-shirts, green- and red-dyed hair, Doc Marten boots, and the ubiquitous use of safety pins for tethering things that should never be tethered – but inwardly admiring, and secretly wishing to join in.

The Pistols were a cultural revelation. Their ferocious energy and sound of ‘broken glass and rusty razor blades’ (Savage 1993: 206) were the perfect antidote to the bloated, self-indulgent, and anodyne music of such groups as the Eagles or Genesis that characterized the first part of the decade, and to whom I was subjected as a teenager. As Savage (1993: 206) writes, ‘At a time when songs generally dealt with the pop archetypes of escape or love, the Sex Pistols threw up a series of insults and rejections, couched in a new pop language that was tersely allusive and yet recognisable as everyday speech.’ That language, along with the Pistols’ clothing, hair-style, body piercing, snarling and swearing all seemed for me at the time a seductive oppositional youth culture and way of life that uncannily matched the mid-to-late seventies England of strikes, discontent, and resentment in which I lived. I even thought they might have something to say to geographers, and cheekily titled one of my third-year undergraduate papers, ‘Never Mind the Truth. Here’s the Ideologues,’ a first foray into the world of intellectual anarchy.

For this section of the book, and for my own editorial introduction, I’ve again cheekily misappropriated the Pistol’s title, and on their own silver jubilee. (Will anyone sing God Save the Pistols?) My contention is that the history of the band and their record raise the same issue that is at the centre of four contributions in this section of the Handbook, the relationship between culture and economy. This might appear a stretch even for a book in cultural geography. But in both popular and academic treatments of the Sex Pistols, what emerges is a

tension between them as a voice of culture and as an economic commodity. On the one hand, they represented a distinct 'break in the pop milieu ... nothing like it had been heard in rock 'n' roll before and nothing like it has been heard since' (Marcus, 1989: 2-3). As the Radio One DJ John Peel put it, 'You went to the gigs and there was a feeling that you were participating in something that had come from another planet, it seemed so remarkable it was happening at all' (quoted in Marcus, 1989: 41). If the hallmarks of culture are innovation, new forms of language, and changed values and ways of life, the Sex Pistols were real culture. On the other hand, the Pistols from their very creation were about making money, of selling product, of generating 'filthy lucre,' of being part of 'the great rock 'n' roll swindle' (Mitchell, 2000: 68). It was not for nothing that they recorded with on-the-run great train robber Ronnie Biggs, that Johnny Rotten engaged in an eight-year legal suit with Malcolm McLaren, the Pistols' manager, to recover unpaid royalties (Lydon, 1994, chs, 19-20), or that McLaren himself coined the slogan 'cash from chaos'.

The four contributors to this section of the book – Meric Gertler, Linda McDowell, Adam Tickell, and Don Slater – see the same kind of tension between culture and economy that I am claiming for the Sex Pistols playing out in different parts of economic geography, respectively, in production, labour markets, finance, and consumption. This is new. Until the recent past, culture was a dirty term within the discipline, its use met with the same word that the London metropolitan police were so anxious to conceal from the Sex Pistol's album cover. One result, as Thrift (2000a: 692) puts it, was that 'by the 1980s economic geography was in a pretty moribund state, at risk of boring its audience to death.' It was as if the Eagles and Genesis had left the world of pop music, and took up home in economic geography. But things are changing. During the 1990s, economic geographers began opening up Pandora's box of culture, to use Thrift's (2000a) metaphor. And once opened there is no closing it again. Furthermore, as in that original myth, what remains after the lid is off is hope. The same holds true here. In this case, the hope as economic geography engages culture is for a vibrant, energetic, and edgy discipline, a punk economic geography.

In this editorial introduction, I begin by briefly reviewing some of the different positions on the culture vs. economy issue, and then examine how they have been worked out in the discipline. There are no easy solutions. Almost everyone except for a 'paid-up member of the Khmer Rouge' (Eagleton, 1995: 35) thinks that it is not either/or but both/and when it comes to culture and economy. But the difficult issue is their precise relation and theorization.

### **Culture vs. Economy**

Terry Eagleton's (2000) 'manifesto' on culture begins with the term's tangled and ambivalent etymological meaning. At first culture 'denoted a thoroughly material process,' that of cultivating the land, of using brawn, skill, and material resources to put food on the table (Eagleton, 2000: 1). Later, though, the word is 'metaphorically transposed to affairs of the spirit' (Eagleton, 2000: 1), becoming a Bach fugue, a Botticelli portrait, a Balzac novel.

The word [culture] thus charts within its semantic unfolding humanity's own historic shift from rural to urban existence, pig-farming to Picasso, tilling the soil to splitting the

atom. In Marxist parlance, it brings together both base and superstructure in a single notion (Eagleton, 2000: 1).

Culture and economy are yoked from the beginning, and the supposed opposition between a basic, brute materialist logic, and an ethereally refined non-materialist one, is false. Eagleton's reference to Marxism is also useful. Marxism has been the main forum in which debates about that yoking have been staged, at least in the post-war period, and certainly in economic geography.

That Marxism has played that role is unsurprising. Neoclassical economics, which offers the principal (and orthodox) alternative interpretation of the economy, has no truck with culture, reducing it to the 'colorless blanket' of utility-maximizing rational agents (Georgescu-Roegen, 1968: 264). As Margaret Thatcher might have said, 'There is no such thing as culture.' In contrast, culture is there from the beginning in Marx's analysis. His most succinct, and perhaps best-known theoretical statement is found in the Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy (1859). There he writes, 'the mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness' (Marx 1904: preface)

It is around those two sentences that an academic interpretive industry of Fordist proportions has agglomerated. The 'classical' interpretation is of economic determinism: culture as a set of 'social, political and intellectual processes in general' is irrevocably determined by the economy, 'the mode of production'. Culture is thereby reduced to an epiphenomenon, performing the functional role of ideological smokescreen for an oppressive capitalist class bent on immiserising the proletariat. While in the past this position may have had some currency, there is not much evidence of it now, at least in geography. Former dye-in-the-wool, classical Marxists such as Dick Peet (2000: 1215) are now searching for 'the cultural source of economies,' urging the use of 'cultural terms such as symbol, imaginary, and rationality ... to understand crucial economic processes' (p. 1213). As Peet (2000: 1231) writes, 'In a phrase I never thought I would say, political economy should become cultural economy.' Or Neil Smith who in his earlier days trumpeted 'the universalization of value in the form of abstract labour' (Smith, 1984: 82) now says, "'Back-to-class" in any narrow sense is its own self-defeating cul-de-sac' (Smith 2000: 1028), and it is necessary 'to find a way of integrating class into the issues of identity and cultural politics' (Smith, 2000: 1011). David Harvey is maybe one of the few holdouts although his own position has never been straightforward. At the very least there is a disjuncture between the prefaces and introductions to his books, which are lithe and limber, with references to novelists, popular culture and the cultural-situation of Harvey himself, and the body of the text that follows that often go in for categorical statements about the paramount importance of the economy. His latest book, Spaces of Hope (Harvey, 2000, ch. 1) gives both perspectives in the same introductory chapter, 'The difference a generation makes'. Harvey provides a wonderfully evocative account of his own shifting cultural position as a university teacher running an annual seminar since 1971 on Marx's Capital (Volume 1) in American and British universities. But the thrust of his argument is against just such a cultural positioning, and more broadly, against 'cultural analysis [which has] supplanted political economy (the former, in any case, being much more fun than being observed in the dour world and crushing realities of capitalist exploitation)'

(Harvey 2000: 5). For Harvey (2000: 7) it is those ‘crushing realities’ that demand our attention, and his list of the most important – ‘fetishism of the market,’ ‘the savage history of downsizing,’ ‘technological change,’ ‘weakened organized labour,’ and an ‘industrial reserve army’ – make it clear that it isn’t going to be fun. We need to roll up our sleeves, and be prepared for some serious work. No more lolly-gagging and fripperies, no more ‘holidays in the sun’ (Sex Pistols, 1977).

That said, there are places where Harvey offers a softer position, recognising the autonomy and importance of the cultural sphere. In fact, within the Marxist canon there is a continuum of softer positions, and which vary from opening the economy to culture just a crack to engaging in a full-blown cultural analysis where the economy is barely present, if it is present at all. At one end, and closest to classical Marxism, are analyses by writers such as Antonio Gramsci (‘cultural hegemony) or Louis Althusser (‘determination in the last instance’) who, while recognising that culture is not utterly determined by the economy, keep it on a short leash, ‘characteristically analys[ing it] in relation to class structures and the social hegemony of economically dominant groups’ (Bradley and Fenton, 1999: 114).

Softer still, and occupying a middle ground, are people associated with the founding of cultural studies such as Raymond Williams (‘structure of feeling’), Richard Hoggart (‘the felt quality of life’), and later Stuart Hall (‘Marxism without guarantees’), and discussed by a number of contributors to this volume. The importance of this group is in attempting to hang on to class analysis and the economy, and also recognising values, ways of life, and emotional and political commitments that lay outside. Hence, for example, William’s phrase the ‘structure of feeling’ that connotes the ‘doubleness of culture ... [as both] material reality and lived experience’ (Eagleton 2000: 36). Also somewhere in this middle range, but from a different intellectual lineage, is Andrew Sayer’s (1997; and Ray and Sayer, 1999) position informed by a critical realist philosophy. Using realism as a scalpel, Sayer pares away the superfluous and contingent revealing the precise meanings and limits of the concepts ‘economy’ and ‘culture’, showing that while they are not synonymous, they are not antonyms either (Ray and Sayer, 1999: 4). Rather, economy and culture interact according to their respective logics – culture as ‘dialogical,’ economy as ‘instrumental’ (Sayer, 1997: 25) – producing complex effects that must be continually scrutinized conceptually and empirically. One final example of work carried out in this intermediate terrain is Nancy Fraser’s (1995, 1999), and influencing the new Neil Smith (2000; also see McDowell 2000a). Economy and culture for her are transposed into two seemingly quite different claims for social justice, respectively, the politics of redistribution, and the politics of recognition. The trick, though, as in all of this work is to have both within ‘a single comprehensive framework’ (Fraser, 1999: 26), which is what she attempts.

Finally, at the other end of the continuum, are postmodern or post-structural approaches that not only begin to disassociate the economy from culture, but in their ‘more extreme versions’ reduce and de-socialise culture to ‘no more than a free play of texts, representations and discourses’ (Bradley and Fenton, 1999: 114). In economic geography, the best example is J. K. Gibson-Graham’s (1996) work that deploys a radical version of Althusserian overdetermination in which everything causes everything else. In brief, Gibson-Graham’s argument is that one of the mistakes of political economy is to assume a single, unified capitalist totality; that is, to treat it as an inviolable constant, rather than as a particular kind of discourse. Once the discursive nature

of capitalism is recognised, political possibilities and strategies for change suggest themselves. To enact them, however, requires understanding how the idea of capitalism became hegemonic in the first place. For Gibson-Graham, drawing on a number of post-structuralist writers, it is because knowledge of the economy is approached from a particular cultural slant: heroic, essentialist, and masculinist. Change that slant and we will have The End of Capitalism (As we Knew it).

In sum, this review provides only the thinnest of glosses. There are other approaches within economics for interpreting culture that I have not discussed such as post-Keynesianism, evolutionary economics, or institutionalism (in this light, see Ron Martin and Peter Sunley's 2001 reply to Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift 2000 castigating them for ignoring the panoply of heterodox theoretical economic traditions available for reconstructing economic geography). Or again, there is the Weberian take on culture and economics bound up with 'social status' and 'life chances'. Or the functionalist one of Talcott Parsons, and worked out in terms of imperatives for social integration involving among other things cultural 'latency' and economic 'adaptation'. And recently, even the pragmatist American philosopher Richard Rorty (1999: 227), hitherto an aggressive champion of the cultural, has got into the act, writing that 'the soul of history is economic.' This is from a man who also argues that 'the sheer clumsiness of attempts to use "a problematic coming from the Marxist tradition" when dealing with contemporary problems is the most persuasive reason for doubting ... that we must read and reread Marx' (p. 221). Clumsiness, though, hardly describes the various attempts I reviewed by Marxists to deal with culture and economy. They are creative and innovative, just like culture itself. But the task of delineating clear links between culture and economy is daunting. Raymond Williams (1976) said that culture alone is 'one of the two or three most complex words in the English language'. And once joined with economy the combination becomes dense and tangled. Perhaps the way forward is less the single road of grand theoretical statement, but paths that are more piece-meal, less-defined and limited, and which join bits of empirical study and modest cultural theory. As Harriet Bradley and Steve Fenton (1999: 122) write: 'The relationship between culture and economy ... cannot be deduced from abstract principles, but can only be elucidated in specific contexts.' This is not to forget the larger question, but to bracket it to enable a 'close dialogue' between economy and culture, as Linda McDowell (2000b: 16) puts it. It is precisely this kind of 'close dialogue' that characterizes the work in which economic geographers have been engaged, and to which I will now turn.

### **Culture and economic geography**

Issues of culture implicitly run through Anglo-American economic geography from the beginning (Barnes, 2001a). Early texts like George Chisholm's (1889) Handbook of Commercial Geography, or J. Russell Smith's (1913) Industrial and Commercial Geography, while replete with trade figures, production statistics, and maps of economic specialization, were also about ways of life, values and beliefs, and material artefacts (Chisholm's 'commodities' and Smith's 'industrial products'), that is, they were about culture. Even during the 1960s and early 1970s when economic geography was 'spatial science', and mimicking neoclassical economics, culture still made a difference. For example, one of the founding texts of spatial science was the German location theorist August Lösch's (1954) The Economics of Location (Barnes, 2001b), and framed in terms of the spartan landscape of geometrical axioms and differential equations. But behind that formalism was culture, in this case Lösch's own life world of pre-Second World

War Swabia. Lösch (1954: xv) says as much in his Preface: 'my youthful experience in a little Swabian town constitutes the real background of this book ... [and] my original experience there confirm my final theories.' This is picked up by Peter Gould (1986: 15) who writes, '[Lösch's] landscape is not just geometry, but is inhabited by people joined by a complexity of social relations, not the least of which may be a deep sense of rootedness, of Bodenständigkeit, in the region itself.' You can take Lösch out of Swabian culture, but you can't take Swabian culture out of Lösch. It goes all the way down even into mathematical symbols and precisely drawn figures (for other examples see Barnes, 2001b).

Of course, this is revisionist history, and I am not suggesting that economic geographers at the time articulated their concerns in the vocabulary of culture. Quite the opposite. But it indicates that culture was always present at least implicitly within the discipline. The first explicit introduction is in Doreen Massey's (1984) book Spatial Divisions of Labour. There she builds into the very spatial process of capitalist accumulation a role for local culture, conceived historically and geographically as the sum of the sedimented layers of past interactions between rounds of investment and cultural characteristics of place (Warde, 1985). She uses the example of South Wales, and represents its history over the twentieth century as a reciprocal relationship between public and private investment and the culture of that region. Constituting that culture are masculinism, a family structure of male patriarchy, a set of religious beliefs and practices especially around the Methodist church, a left-wing politics associated with both trade unionism and the British Labour party, and strong, tight-knit local communities of relatively isolated single-industry towns (Massey, 1984, ch. 5).

Although the significance of Massey's book was quickly appreciated, it took a long while before its cultural sensibility was widely taken up. Admittedly, the locality project that followed closely on its heels, gave the promise of culture, but many of the studies it generated turned out as traditional and often narrowly conceived empirical analyses of local labour markets, and saying very little about culture (Cooke, 1989). That the cultural part of Massey's book remained underemphasized was in part because of the continuing dominance of political economic approaches in economic geography such as regulationist theory (Peck and Tickell, 1992), or Scott and Storper's (1992) framework of flexible production, or Harvey's (1989) ideas of space-time annihilation, all of which gave primary prominence to the economy, and relegating culture to at best a secondary role. This began to change in the early 1990s as ideas from cultural studies, both the British version as well as the American that tended to be more post-modern and post-structural, entered the discipline. Furthermore, this coincided with a realization by economic geographers and others of a change in the very nature of the economy as it defined itself through culture, and which affected the nature of goods produced and sold, the behaviour and choices of consumers, and the very internal work-a-day operations of private firms. Here Lash and Urry's (1994) book on 'economies of signs', Beck's (1992) work on 'reflexive modernization,' and in geography, Thrift's (1997) writings on 'soft capitalism' were signal contributions. There was a recognition that the economy operated as a discursive construction for everyone within it, and therefore it was susceptible to the tools of cultural analysis. As Thrift (1997: 30) says, 'capitalism seems to be undergoing its own cultural turn as increasingly ... business is about the creation, fostering, and distribution of knowledge.'

Good reviews of economic geography's subsequent 'cultural turn' already exist (Crang, 1997; Thrift, 2000a), and the four chapters that follow also provide assessments of their respective sub-areas. As a result, let me only briefly highlight five substantive areas of writing to provide a flavour of the burgeoning literature in this field. The first is on labour markets and work. Often drawing upon post-structural and post-colonial feminist theory, there is an emphasis on the close relation among cultural performance at work centred on the body, the places and spaces in which that work is carried out, and the material consequences (Crang, 1994; Hanson and Pratt, 1995; McDowell, 1997; Leslie and Butz, 1998; Pratt, 1999). The second is on the development and use of hi-tech. The stress here is on the significance of institutional embeddedness, close personal contacts that demand proximity, tacit knowledge, and shared cultural assumptions. Without this particular kind of culture of production, goes the argument, geographical phenomena like learning regions, hi-tech centres, and networks of association would never emerge; it is part of their very constitution (Saxenian, 1994; Gertler, 1997, 2000; Storper, 1997; Cooke and Morgan, 1998). The third is on the financial sector, and other high-level, information-based service sectors such as business consultancy. Given the need for both high degrees of personal interaction and interpretive skills in these activities, research focuses on the culture of those who interact – their ethnicity, gender, values and beliefs – the places of interaction (often the cores of world cities), and the semiotic and discursive strategies used for interpretation (Tickell, 1996; Clark and O'Connor, 1997; Leyshon and Thrift, 1997; McDowell, 1997; Thrift, 2000b). The fourth is about the corporation. Accentuated here are the various discourses, different and even contradictory, that shape high-level management culture, and, in turn, influence the course of the firm. As O'Neil and Gibson-Graham (1999: 15) put it, 'business is the process of talk ...', and for talk, even corporate talk, to make sense and have effects it must be understood within specific cultural practices (Schoenberger 1997; 1999; Marcus, 1998; O'Neil and Gibson-Graham, 1999). The last area is around consumption. Much of this work is concerned with reconceiving the consumer as an actor by moving away from the models of rational utility-maximization and the consumer as dupe of the market to approaches that allow a cultural sensitivity in understanding the nature of the goods consumed (commodities as signs), the motivations for consumption, and the places in which they are bought (leading to a new geography of retailing; Glennie and Thrift, 1996; Gregson and Crewe, 1997; Jackson et al., 1998; Goss, 1999)

Whether Thrift (2000: 692) is right that economic geographers are now '... the leading exponents of cultural geography' is in some sense moot. What is astounding is that economic geographers are doing cultural geography at all. While culture was always implicit within the discipline, it required a radical transformation to make it explicit. Of course, there are critics like Harvey (2000) and Storper (2001) who argue that the focus on culture distracts too much from 'the "hard world" of production and things' (Hall, 1988), and economic geographers would be better off if they devoted their energies to them. But what emerges from the literature I reviewed is the inseparability of culture from that 'hard world.' It is not something to be detached and put to one side while serious work is first devoted to 'production and things'. It is more complicated, and no less serious. It is not let's do the serious thing first by examining the economy and then if there is time have 'fun' with culture, but it is doing both together.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout this essay, I've often used the two terms 'economy' and 'culture' as if they are self-sufficient, separate, and centred. They are not. One of the intellectual impulses behind the cultural turn in economic geography is to undermine dualities, and the dualism of culture and economy is one that should go. The hope is for a world in which the very distinction between economy and culture is no longer important. Such a re-orientation, though, is difficult, and disorientating, because familiar conceptual hand holds for understanding are taken away.

This leads back to the Sex Pistols. Their music was also about disrupting traditional categories, of not fitting into one conceptual box or another. Graham Lewis of Wire says of punk rock, 'it was a deconstruction, it was a piss-take of Rock music. The structures were Rock'n'Roll, taken apart and put together in different ways. This is how they go, but not quite. They swerve' (quoted in Savage 1993: 329). As a result, the Pistols didn't look like, sound like, or write songs like any musicians before them; indeed, some would say they weren't musicians at all. Bernard Sumner, lead singer for New Order, and formerly a member of Joy Division, said after seeing the Pistols, 'They were terrible. I thought they were great. I wanted to get up and be terrible too' (quoted in Marcus, 1989: 7). It's the same with the cultural turn in economic geography. It attempts to undo formerly fixed conceptual categories of economic geography, and put them together again in different ways, and adding new ones as well; it swerves. Furthermore, just as there was experimentation, of trying things out -- Sid Vicious said, 'you just pick a chord, go twang, and you have music' -- and a do-it-yourself approach to punk, the same applies to the new culturally informed approach to economic geography. It won't always work, it will be 'terrible,' but it will be 'great' as well. For some punk economic geography read on.

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