

The Blackwell Cultural Economy Reader. Edited by A. Amin and N. J. Thrift. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004.

While the economy as a set of material practices has existed ever since “Adam delved and Eve span,” it was not conceptualised as separate until about three hundred years ago. In fact, some argue it is even more recent – Mitchell (1998) puts it as late as the early 1940s. Whatever the exact date, if there is an exact date, the point is that the economy as an object is knowable only through a particular discourse, not preceding or existing outside it. Until recently, the hegemonic discourse of the economy derived from neoclassical economics (and which for a period held sway in economic geography). Consequently, the economy was conceived as strong, rational, dispassionate, and above all singular and self-contained. But as Amin and Thrift (p. x) note in their Introduction, there are now “signs that this hegemony is beginning to break down or at the very least is beginning to fray at the edges.” The excellent papers gathered here, all previously published elsewhere, explore the frayed ends. In different ways, all of the chapters argue that the economy must be understood widely and expansively, as a hybrid, with no single logic or essence. Everything neoclassicism seeks to exclude must potentially be let in, fundamentally opening up the “question [of] what counts as economy” (p. x).

Following an uneven Introduction – some brilliant one-liners intermixed with too many lists, and conceptual maps that never quite map – the book is divided into six sections. The 21 essays are often edited from the original, and drawn from a wide range of sources. I thought I knew the area of cultural economy relatively well, but I was familiar with only about a third of the essays included.

The first section on Production I thought never quite gelled. But I suspect this is because of my own Fordist mentality. When I read Production, I expected stories of mopped brows and

elbow grease, Paul Willis's "lads," and robotic Taylorist workers. Instead, there were unemployed designers of fashion clothing, peripatetic software engineers, smooth talking business consultants, and the not-quite-so-smooth talking Michel Callon, the seminal actor network theorist, on "the economy of qualities." Seán Ó'Riain's chapter "Net-working for a living: Irish software developers in the global workplace" was especially good. It was an ethnography of work written by a participant observer, an Ur travel narrative of departure and return, and an on-the-edge-of-your-seat story of making impossible deadlines in an around-the-world, around-the-clock economy. It was so gripping I was exhausted by the end. Undoubtedly there were some mopped brows after all.

The section on Finance and Money was superb. Each of the essays was quite different in tone and focus, but they luminously illustrated the wider thesis of the book; the economy is not strong and singular, but a fragile accomplishment held together by disparate and unexpected sources (frequently non-economic). Anna Tsing writes elegantly and compellingly of the Bre-X gold-mining scandal in Indonesia of the mid-1990s showing how its seeming global economic character was produced by highly specific, heterogeneous, contingent articulations across varied spatial scales. Donald MacKenzie draws upon science and technology studies to argue finance theory doesn't so much describe financial markets as perform them, bringing into reality its equations and almost impossible calculations. And in maybe the best essay in the book, Karin Knorr-Cetina and Urs Bruegger drawing upon participant observation of a Zurich currency trade floor argue that the market is the computer screen, and heralding a new "post-social" relationship within a post-industrial economy.

Regulation, the section that follows, is almost good. The standout essay is by Lewis Lapham, editor of Harpers, "The agony of Mammon." There is not much agony, though, among

the global hoi polloi – the world’s regulators – who meet once a year in Davos, Switzerland, at the World Forum, and the subject of Lapham’s essay. They are outrageously pampered. Walter Bagehot’s quip of a hundred and fifty years ago still applies: “Poverty is an anomaly to rich people. It is very difficult to make out why people who want dinner do not ring the bell.”

Commodity Chains that came next sagged in comparison. But the tone was ratcheted back up in the next section on Consumption. All four chapters were excellent, beautifully illustrating how consumers are always more than “homogeneous globules of desire” as Thorsten Veblen once put it. In spite of the titillating title, Danny Miller’s “Making love in supermarkets” is moving and poignant. Using ethnographies of North London shoppers, it suggests much consumption is a gesture of love made to people about whom we most care. Alison Clarke in “Window shopping at home” interviewed the most amazing set of people for her study of how the classifieds and mail order catalogues are used to negotiate life, love, and just about everything else. I was so caught up by some of the vignettes I didn’t want them to end. What happened to Jennifer and Mike, and their unsteady relationship pursued through buying second-hand goods from the Loot? And have Phil and Spencer been arrested yet? Haidy Geismar’s “What’s in a price?” shows that the paradigm example of the free market – the auction – is in fact clogged, glummed up with cultural codes, sleights of hand, and extravagant performances. Whatever the market is, it’s not free. Finally, Phil Crang’s “It’s showtime” uses participant observation at a themed restaurant somewhere in SE England to show that the world’s a stage, and we’re mere players on it. Certainly, this is true of the food servers, of which Crang is one, and made to dress up in top hats, but also the customers. Everyone follows a script.

The final section on Economy of Passions was patchy. Part of the problem was that I was never clear what the section title meant. Passion, after all, was a key component of many of the

previous essays. By far the best chapter was Arlie Hochschild's "Feeling management." Although originally written in 1983 it picks up theoretically on current ideas of cultural performance and worked through in her participant observation study of Delta Airline flight attendants. Especially clear is the disjunction between the fantasy roles that the almost exclusively female work force of flight attendants must play (the relation between sex and money is so transparent), and the often fraught and exhausting everyday work conditions that they actually face.

Predictions about the demise of neoclassical economic's hegemonic discourse of the economy has been made before, but so far, they've have been greatly exaggerated. I hope Amin and Thrift's assessment that this really is the beginning of the end is right. Certainly, their excellent collection counters that hegemony, providing a richly drawn and persuasive alternative, cultural economy. Nigel Thrift (2000: 701) wrote a few years ago, "A cultural geography of economics and economists? Now that's a thought." The Blackwell Cultural Economy Reader well demonstrates that this is no longer just a thought.

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References

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