

## **Cultural Analysis, Urban Political Economy and Critique**

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The dimensions of 'the urban' in cultural studies remain undertheorized, even though most of the research in cultural studies focuses on cultural practices in urban environments. The focus of this article is methodological. The first section highlights the analytical and ethical concerns of cultural studies. The second section takes another look at the debate that took place between Stuart Hall and Bob Jessop in the 1980s in order to understand the methodological biases this confrontation has produced and how this inhibits a sophisticated understanding of urban complexity. The article then proceeds to discuss possible routes towards a more complex notion of the intertwinement of culture and the urban political economy. Throughout the paper, it is argued that the notion of critique remains central to cultural studies, but that there is a need to re-specify this critique in order to come to terms with the structural depth of urban spaces.

# Cultural Analysis, Urban Political Economy and Critique

## Introduction

In many ways, cultural studies has always been a discipline concerned with the urban environment. Although 'the urban' is often not explicitly thematized as such, if one looks at the actual empirical research undertaken, there is a clear orientation towards cultural practices within an urban context.<sup>1</sup> From 'classics' such as Hebdige's *Subculture* (1979), De Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), Hall and Jefferson's *Resistance through Rituals* (1975) or Gilroy's *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (1987) to newer work such as Lash's *Critique of Information* (2002) and Highmore's *Cityscapes* (2005) – many publications focus on urban cultures in one way or another. Nevertheless, despite this urban bias, in this literature there is only a limited acknowledgment and conceptual grasp of urban complexity and the ways in which broader processes thoroughly, but differentially structure particular cultures. This inhibits a clear and in-depth understanding of the specificity of certain cities – i.e. an understanding of what makes cities different as well as similar – and all too often leads to rather sweeping and generalizing arguments and critiques.

This situation is partly the result of cultural studies' reliance on popular culture as the source of critique, which tends to lead to a depiction of complex social structures as relatively 'flat'. Nevertheless, cultural studies can never go beyond 'the popular' in any simple sense, since this focus was driven by analytical as well as ethical concerns that – in my view – ought to remain at the center of attention. There is a need, however, to re-specify the notion of critique as used by cultural studies and the goal of this article is to offer some first thoughts on how to do so.

## Analytical and Ethical Concerns

So let me start with a few words on these analytical and ethical concerns. Couldry argues that what defines cultural studies as a "distinctive area of study" (2000, p. 2) is its focus on the relationship between culture and power, but this is too broad a definition. It is not simply culture and power as such that is the focus of cultural studies, but an understanding of critique as emanating from a particular dimension of culture: not mass culture, but ordinary culture (Williams 1958), everyday life (De Certeau 1984) or – particularly since the Birmingham school – popular culture. These terms were never unproblematic and McCarthy (2006) offers a brilliant account of the tensions existent within and between these terms, but in general terms the main reason for highlighting these – and not other – dimensions of culture has always been both analytical as well as ethical. Analytical, since cultural studies was never interested in simply studying various forms of popular culture for the sake of data collection, but always to better understand the resilience of and potentials for resistance within these cultures in the face of powerful regimes. So it was never simply about the celebration of alternative, marginal and radical cultures, but always about the analysis of these cultures *in relation to* wider processes of regulation and

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1 In this article, I largely focus on the 'British' lineage of cultural studies and, by doing so, create a somewhat purified history of cultural studies. A longer version of this article would have to include the various local appropriations of cultural studies as a result of its globalisation. It would also have to dedicate much more space to the emergence of newer sub-disciplines such as cultural sociology in order to account for the 'internal fragmentation' of cultural studies.

control. Ethical, because cultural studies has always tried to avoid the ‘intellectualist bias’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) - in which the analyst naturalizes and prioritizes his or her position and theoretical stance in relation to extra-academic cultural practices – by developing more modest and dialogical forms of engagement and analysis. This has led to a different understanding of the location of critique: instead of treating the academy as the ultimate arbiter of truth, cultural studies has emphasized the role of cultural practices as bearers of critical potential with academic reflection in a much more modest as well as collaborative role.

### Stuart Hall and/or Bob Jessop

This analytical and ethical attention to ‘the popular’ is important, but it faces a couple of methodological problems. These have created analytical biases that have obstructed a sophisticated understanding of social and urban complexity. Many of these biases can be broadly traced back to the ways in which cultural studies has dealt with its disciplinary ‘others’ (in particular sociology and ‘traditional’ Marxism) during its emergence and defense of its existence as a valid area of research, but specifically I find these biases to be most clearly addressed in the debate that took place between Hall and Jessop (and his co-authors) in the *New Left Review* in the mid-1980s concerning the nature of Thatcherism. Even though they don’t explicitly address the urban, their theoretical differences point to the advantages and disadvantages of the cultural studies’ approach in grasping social and urban complexity.

Hall, in earlier work, had developed the concept of authoritarian populism (AP) in order to be able to characterize Thatcherism as a regime involving the construction of authoritarian forms of class politics, but one simultaneously rooted in certain popular forms of discontent. This Gramscian appropriation enabled Hall to foreground questions of ideology and to focus on “the ways in which popular consent can be so constructed, by a historical bloc seeking hegemony, as to harness to its support some popular discontents, neutralize the opposing forces, disaggregate the opposition and really incorporate some strategic elements of popular opinion into its own hegemonic project” (1985, p. 118). It is this sensitivity to the inclusion of ‘the popular’ by the state that forms the main theoretical advance on Jessop at the time, since the latter hardly offers any tools to understand the success of the Thatcher regime in resonating with popular concerns. It is in this respect that I think the allegation of economism is correct. In the 1984 and 1985 articles, Jessop et al. largely downplay the role of ideology and often fall back onto rather ‘thin’ conceptions of human sociality and motivation. Thus, whereas Hall emphasizes authoritarian populism, Jessop et al. warn the reader to also look at more pragmatic (read: economic) interests such as “lower direct taxation, council house sales, rising living standards for those still in private sector employment, lower inflation, and so forth” (1984, pp. 78-79).

However, despite its obvious advantages, Hall’s notion of authoritarian populism simultaneously leads to a reduction of social and urban complexity. This has to do with the level of analytical abstraction he claims to adopt. In his reply to Jessop et al., Hall admits that his theorization of authoritarian populism was “a bit rough and ready” (1985, p. 118), but he argues this was linked to the level of abstraction at which one prefers to work. As he writes:

I do not believe that all concepts operate at the same level of abstraction – indeed, I think one of the principal things which separates me from the fundamentalist marxist revival is precisely that they believe that the concepts

which Marx advanced at the highest level of abstraction (i.e. mode of production, capitalist epoch) can be transferred directly into the analysis of concrete historical conjunctures. My own view is that concepts like that of ‘hegemony’ (the family or level of abstraction to which AP also belongs) are of necessity somewhat ‘descriptive’, historically more time-bound, concrete in their reference – because they attempt to conceptualize what Marx himself said of ‘the concrete’: that it is the ‘product of many determinations’. (p. 118)

Hall’s main point here simply seems to be that the notion of hegemony needs to be understood as part of what Merton (1968, pp. 39-72) called theories of the middle-range i.e. theories in-between radical empiricism and grand theories. It is questionable, however, if the notion of hegemony is capable of performing this task, because even though Hall accepts that he only offers a partial explanation of Thatcherism – namely, of the “political/ideological conjuncture” (p. 119) – he uses the notion of hegemony to refer to “changes in the ‘balance of forces’”, which includes the “modalities of political and ideological relations between the ruling bloc, the state and the dominated classes” (p. 119). But surely, not all relations that determine changes in the balance of forces are best characterized as ideological? Economic crisis or breakdown, for example, is without a doubt ideologically mediated, but hardly reducible to this moment of mediation – it is (also) an *economic* crisis, after all. Hall acknowledges this with his emphasis that he doesn’t accept the “dissolution of everything into discourse” (p. 122), but his lack of attention to questions of political economy makes it impossible for him to understand the extent to which “economic activity” – as Jessop et al. put it in their reply – needs to be considered “as a determining element in hegemonic politics” (1985, p. 93). In Hall’s account, in other words, the choice for a middle-range level of abstraction through the concept of hegemony involves not so much a concretization of highly abstract Marxist concepts, but a lack of theorization and marginalization of political and economic determinations.

### Culture, Political Economy and Urban Complexity

So how does one acknowledge urban complexity and what are the consequences of this acknowledgement for understanding urban cultures? Clearly, simply embracing complexity won’t do, since it leaves open the basic methodological question of how to apply such a notion to empirical data (McLennan 2003, p. 558). It seems to me that more attention should be paid to the following three aspects:

First, analysis might benefit from taking more seriously the premise that urban cultures are the product of multiple determinations. Although cultural studies (incl. Hall) often subscribed to this view, it never really got a handle on the analytical complexity lurking behind this premise. There are, of course, many ways of theorizing determination, but within cultural studies this issue has largely been governed by the often polemical discussions surrounding explanation vs. description. As McLennan (2002) reminds us, early Birmingham cultural studies – as part of their critique of empiricist sociology – actually aspired towards a more explanatory understanding, “achieving proper depth and perspective, with a more adequate transformative political practice to follow as a consequence” (p. 639), but in later work this aspiration has either been rejected or has moved to the background of conceptual attention. I take the position that some level of explanation (and not ‘merely’ description) is necessary for all forms of social inquiry and critique. In the context of research on urban cultures and political economy, therefore, the goal should be to investigate the extent to which particular accumulation regimes and

modes of regulation effect cultural practices, but also to analyze the ways in which the latter shape the former. This avoids the vagueness particularly prevalent within cultural studies concerning the nature and behavior of the political economic 'environment'. It is not enough, for example, to simply refer to neoliberalism as some broad context determining cultural change; one has to be much clearer about how this context is mediated through a variety of scales, institutions and actors and how this differentially impacts on particular cultural practices. Fortunately, some recent work within cultural studies is starting to address these questions. Thus, in their analysis of twentieth-century Vienna, Maderthaner and Musner (2002) choose to analyze urban cultures within the broader paradigm of Fordism. As they argue:

Culture as a social text in this model is neither a direct after-effect of the market nor simply a socio-structurally or historically mediated entity. Rather, the given reciprocal dynamic of accumulation and regulation generates the characteristic texture of the social fabric, which can be interpreted as 'culture' [...]. (874)

This is important work, since it neither sees urban culture as an effect of the market nor as an autonomous phenomenon, but instead as shot through with political economic determinations from various directions and on various levels.

Second, acknowledging these multiple determinations makes it easier for cultural studies to understand how discourses cluster around particular "institutional fixes" (Peck and Tickell 1994) and how this creates a certain sedimentation and stabilization of these discourses and their material effects. Especially since the 1970s, cities have become explicitly targeted by states as sites for the development of entrepreneurial and competitive practices. This has been accompanied by an expansion of governance mechanisms through a variety of public-private partnerships, infrastructure development as well as urban, social and cultural policies (Brenner 2004; O'Connor 2004). Cultural studies could certainly spend more time investigating the impact of these strategies on urban cultures, since these often simply circumvent issues of discursive hegemony. At the same time, I am not making this argument in order to emphasize the actual successes of these strategies in making these cultures more compliant with capital accumulation. On the contrary, what needs to be kept in mind is that the many networks of cultural production and consumption are not mere derivations of the capitalist economy, but always also "alternative modes of regulation" with their own logics that "can never be fully fixed within any one mode of regulation" (Jessop 2002, p. 103). Although the political economy literature has often emphasized this dimension, it has hardly done any research on these alternative forms of regulation. It is here that I can see cultural studies offering important contributions to a truly interdisciplinary debate, since it is one of the few disciplines that has developed a highly differentiated knowledge of contemporary cultures. In order, however, not to fall back onto a simplified and amorphous view of culture, there is a need to investigate where and how these urban cultures interact with other and possibly more dominant modes of regulation.

Adopting a research perspective in which more care is taken to distinguish multiple determinations and in which the focus is on the intertwinement of dominant and alternative modes of regulation offers many advantages. Methodologically – and this is the third and last point – it enables cultural studies to engage more seriously in historical as well as comparative research. The political economy tradition has developed a sophisticated conceptual framework with which to analyze the historical transformations of capitalism in a variety of spatial contexts and on multiple scales, but a similar level of analysis has not been achieved by cultural studies. Although

“[h]istorical contextualization”, according to Johnson, “was and remains an important aspect of cultural studies method” (2001, p. 266), it could be argued that the tendency to focus on the ways in which historical representations are used by contemporary actors has often led to a discursification of history that downplays the structuring role of historical trajectories on contemporary actions. Having said that, I see no reason why this more structural dimension of history cannot be included, since the research narratives within cultural studies are often implicitly driven by historicized arguments. Thus, whereas many in the political economy tradition emphasize the path dependency of political economic change – largely in order to emphasize the persistence of institutions and their role in defining and delimiting agency – as well as the ‘layering’ of new rounds of political regulation and economic accumulation on older already sedimented layers (e.g. Massey 1985), cultural studies tends to highlight the continuity of cultural form (despite constant transformations) and the relative autonomy of ‘the popular’ (despite its partial instrumentalization). This raises the question of theorizing historical change: how can we grasp these continuities and transformations of cultural form in the broader context of political economic determination that is, on the one hand, general (it’s capitalism, after all) as well as specific (it’s capitalism within a particular era in particular urban spaces)? It might be possible and productive to re-interpret the diverse debates on subcultures, cultural identities and popular narratives along these more historical lines in order to complement and complexify the political economic tradition. Undertaking this task would not only improve our understanding of historical change, it would also enable cultural studies to conduct better comparative research. In order to understand the intersections of power and inequality in more concreteness, the focus on the city has its advantages, since it opens up analysis to a certain level of grounded description that Hall saw lacking in the ‘fundamentalist marxist revival’, while retaining a broader explanatory framework that enables the comparison of urban cultures across the world. In contrast to those within cultural studies that reject such a framework, I would argue that it is precisely the adoption of such a ‘totalizing’ framework that enables real differences between cultural practices to be identified.

### Conclusion: Cultural Analysis and Re-Specifying Critique

So where does this leave cultural studies, its sensitivity towards ordinary or popular culture and the role of critique? In the previous sections, I have argued that cultural studies was never simply about the celebration of alternative or residual forms of culture, but always about the analysis of these cultures *in relation to* broader and often more powerful processes of regulation and control. If I am correct in this characterization of the core of cultural studies, then this means that research will have to conceptualize this relation. It is here that the critical political economy tradition offers useful tools that could be appropriated – but not slavishly followed – by cultural studies. The preliminary methodological framework I have developed in the previous sections largely draws upon neo-Marxist work on the contemporary (urban) political economy, but I see no reason why this theoretical approach could not be replaced by or combined with other approaches – the framework is ‘weak’ enough to accommodate a variety of perspectives. The only ontological premise of this framework is that the world is structured, layered, differentiated and relatively resistant to all-encompassing cataclysmic social change, which is the result of my reliance on a critical realist ontology.<sup>2</sup>

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2 See Dean et al. (2005) for a useful introductory overview of critical realism.

If anything, therefore, critique needs to be re-specified in order to be able to reflect on the existence of multiple and partly overlapping and interacting processes. One-size-fits-all critique is not going to cut it. In the case of European cities, I have suggested that it might make sense to analyze urban cultures within the larger framework of the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism, since this enables one to conceptualize cultural practices in relation to particular accumulation regimes and modes of regulation on the urban scale. Critique in this model takes place on two levels. Firstly, there is a need to engage with cultural practices *on their own terms* – something referred to in the literature as immanent critique and practiced by many in cultural studies. As explained by Hartwig, this avoids “the ‘bad circularity’ or arbitrariness implicit in external criteria of knowledge [...] by taking its departure from within the accounts it seeks to situate, correct or replace [...] to demonstrate either that an account is theory-practice inconsistent or, if consistent, beset with aporiai or problems that are insoluble in its own terms” (2007, 107). This immanent critique not only reflects on the phenomena that are the object of investigation, but also on explanatory and/or descriptive accounts used by others to analyze these phenomena, since it is often only through these accounts that one can ‘extract’ empirical data in the first place. Thus, naturally one engages in an immanent critique of urban cultures, but one has to do the same, for example, with state policies representing these urban cultures in order to point to its errors. Although causal argumentation can be and often is used on this level, it is only on the second level that we arrive at a more full-blown explanatory critique. It is here that the problems and paradoxes of the earlier inadequate account are taken up and explained theoretically and sociologically by showing that the identified problems are the effect of particular social causes on deeper (more general) levels of reality. It is at this level that one can introduce broader determinations – such as the shift towards neoliberal forms of governance or structural urban decline – that are often not addressed or visible on the first level of critique, but which do regulate particular urban cultures in one way or another. Such a two-level approach to critique – involving a constant going back-and-forth between immanence and explanation – it seems to me, can contribute to a discipline of cultural studies that is capable of grasping social and urban complexity, while furthering its analytical and ethical concerns.

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