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Andrew Sayer, 'Valuing Culture and Economy', published by the Department of Sociology, Lancaster University, Lancaster LA1 4YN, UK, at <http://www.comp.lancs.ac.uk/sociology/papers/Sayer-Valuing-Culture-and-Economy.pdf>

Publication Details

This web page was last revised on 5th December 2003; the paper was previously published at <http://www.comp.lancs.ac.uk/sociology/soc023as.html> in 1999

Valuing Culture and Economy

Andrew Sayer

Introduction

We live in a highly economised culture, one that has accommodated to division of labour, class, commodification and instrumental rationality to a considerable degree. A long tradition of social theory has been concerned with precisely this. In different ways, thinkers such as Habermas, Polanyi, Weber, Marx, Smith, and as far back as Aristotle have argued that this economisation has detrimental effects on culture, including the moral fabric of societies. Such theory arguably presents too narrow a view of modernity, as the dominant focus on capitalism and the public sphere overlooks important other aspects of contemporary society. In the last thirty years forms of oppression and degradation relating to gender, race, sexuality and cultural imperialism, which were largely ignored by the older critical theory, have been exposed. At the same time, this more recent work either ignores or offers a more positive view of the targets of the older theory. Especially with the cultural turn, it provides a more favourable view of features of modernity such as commodification and the aestheticization of politics which the previous generation attacked - to such an extent in some cases that it might be regarded as complicit in those tendencies. In particular, the treatment of culture as 'the stylization of life' in recent cultural studies is arguably complicit in the aestheticisation of moral-political issues or the de-moralization of culture.

Early political economy was bound up with moral and political philosophy, as in the work of authors such as Smith and Mill. The divorce of these two areas of interest reflects the disembedding of economy brought by the rise of capitalism. Economic, political and bureaucratic systems became detached from the lifeworld and then began to colonise it,



products began to dominate producers, and people became increasingly dependent on the workings of an economic system which, far more than any preceding economy, had a logic and momentum of its own. To paraphrase Habermas, the development of capitalism turned questions of validity into questions of behaviour, (Habermas, 1979, p.6) and this is what has happened to many of the fundamental questions of political economy. As people lost control over their economic lives, the competitive laws of global economy tended to reduce the purchase of normative standpoints on political economy, correspondingly making philosophical discourse on ethics appear irrelevant (Bauman, 1995, p.211). Instead of considering our economic responsibilities towards others, we inquire into the workings of the system and actors' behaviour within it, and where we can find a niche in it. From a contemporary academic observer's perspective, this might look merely like a shift from normative to positive theory. However, that distinction itself is partly a product of the changes in economy and society at issue. Like economic behaviour itself, the study of economics has become devalued in the sense that moral values have been expelled from consideration. Conversely, values and norms have been de-rationalised so that they become mere subjective, emotional dispositions, lying beyond the scope of reason. Thus the (attempted) normative-positive split reflected a real subjectivisation and de-rationalisation of values on the one hand and the de-valuation and expulsion of moral questions from matters of the running of economies on the other.

This de-valuation of political economy is ironic because today 'political' economy - as distinct from economics - tends to see itself as radical and critical of capitalism. In consequence, political economy has come to reflect its enemy and tends to underestimate the extent to which economies are influenced by and have implications for moral-political values. Thus on the one hand, the focus of some recent cultural studies on the stylization of life disables any critical intent, while on the other, the reduction of economy to system and the exclusion of its normative regulation has a similar effect.

Much of the debate over the cultural turn and postmodernism amounts to an argument about whether they represent the end of a critical stance towards contemporary society or a new kind of radical critique. At the same time, in many societies, we are witnessing both a decline of old moral-political principles regarding poverty, equality and fairness, and what amounts to a new moralization of issues formerly accepted without much question, for example concerning gender roles, sexuality, and environment. The decline of the former values is of course highly congenial to the political Right, the latter not, though right-wing liberals should in principle have no objection to much of the latter. These developments also reflect the rise of the (cultural) politics of recognition relative to the (economic) politics of distribution. To understand and assess this uneven development we need to look at both culture and economy and to take values - especially those to do with morality - seriously.

I wish to argue that any adequate understanding of culture and economy and the relationship between them requires a recognition of the extent to which they contain and are shaped by norms and values, including moral-political values. Treating such values as either merely conventional in character or as disguises for instrumental interests weakens explanation and undermines critique. In particular, any study of culture or economy which overlooks or evades the moral dimension or transmutes it into something else, such as aesthetic judgement, power-play or instrumentality, is bound to lack any consistent critical purchase on its object, indeed it is more likely to mystify.

It is not currently fashionable in either cultural or political economic studies to pay great attention to norms and values, particularly those concerning moral issues. In areas influenced by post-structuralism and postmodernism 'ethical disidentification' (Connor, 1993) has been widespread. This refers to the refusal of 'normativity', the concealment or repression of normative standpoints in research, and the suspicion of accounts of social life which acknowledge norms, particularly morality, as anything other than camouflaged power. It is associated with a predominantly relativist mood which discourages both prescription and taking seriously the prescriptions of others regarding the good and how to live. In political economy, relativism is less common, but interest in norms in economic life is limited and normative discussion of justice tends to be left to philosophy. In politics itself, interest in morality and responsibilities tends to be dominated by the Right and is regarded with



suspicion on the Left. In view of these circumstances, it will be necessary to begin with a discussion of how values can best be understood. I shall then examine three main themes regarding morality under modernity - detraditionalisation, instrumentalisation, and the aestheticization of moral-political values - with particular reference to cultural studies. By way of illustration I shall refer Pierre Bourdieu's economic analysis of culture. Then, turning to political economy, I discuss the influence of moral values on economic activity and introduce a new version of the concept of moral economy. I also argue for a revival of normative theory in assessing economic matters.

Although the cultural turn has been associated with a decline in interest in political economy, in many ways contemporary approaches to culture exhibit an unacknowledged compatibility with the values of a highly commodified society. At the same time, despite its critical intent, political economy has largely taken on and mirrored the priorities of the economic processes it studies.

Culture and values

Even though a good deal of social action involves little conscious deliberation, social life always also involves judgement, whether it concerns the use-value of objects or skills, aesthetic qualities, or moral-political issues regarding good and bad ways of living, forms of social organisation, and ways of acting towards others. Of course, values and norms, as more settled judgements, show significant cultural variation and indeed are a central feature of culture in the broad, anthropological sense. Values range from those regarding matters which have only minor implications for others (for example tastes in music) and therefore give rise to little serious dispute, through to those which have great consequences for others (including non-humans) such as those regarding rights to work, medical ethics, and environment and hence whose disputation is serious.

At one level this is elementary, but how we interpret values is critical. Many are non-instrumental; what they value is seen as good or bad in itself rather than in terms of being a means to some other end. Thus education might be valued not merely as useful for getting a job, but as good in itself. As we shall see, the distinction between instrumental and non-instrumental action and how they should be evaluated is fundamental to critiques of modernity and interpretations of the relationship between culture and economy.

In saying that things are valued in themselves I don't mean to suggest that the thing valued could be good or bad independently of anyone valuing them, as if, say, a mountain could be intrinsically beautiful regardless of the existence of anyone to value it. Values are essentially relational, involving both subject and object. Equally this implies that values - or at least most values - cannot be understood as purely subjective, conventional, and arbitrary, that is as having nothing to do with the qualities of the valued object or practice. To treat values as relational is to acknowledge both that the object has particular qualities and that there are different ways that these can be understood and valued in different societies, so that they can be contested. Where there is contestation, it implies there is something that the disputants are addressing in common, even though it cannot be addressed outside some framework or other.

Two common non-relational and hence problematic views of values and value-judgement are those of subjectivism and conventionalism/relativism. Values are not reducible to subjective, individual preferences as in rational choice theory but are inter-subjective and supra-individual (Williams, 1972). Conventionalist or relativist approaches accept the latter point but treat values as arbitrary conventions. In an ironic parallel with positivism, they treat values as beyond rational evaluation, as if they were 'science-free' (Bhaskar, 1979; Matteo, 1996). Both individualism and conventionalism resonate with the tendency of markets to individualise action, and to prioritise questions of what will meet others' preferences - and hence what will sell - over questions of what is right or good. In other words, while relativist positions on values might appear radical, they are actually very congenial to capitalism.

Even if social scientists do not adopt such views explicitly, the common wish to avoid making judgements of the values of those whom they study, for fear of ethnocentrism or related kinds of bias, coupled with the absence of normative theory in much of social science, pushes them



in the same direction. For example, in studying a struggle of anti-racists against a racist society, advocates of this value-neutrality would have to abstain from evaluating the explanations and justifications offered by each side for their behaviour. However, whether the lay explanations are correct makes a difference to what happens. If the causes of, say, different living standards of different ethnic groups are not those assumed by racists, then the social scientist's explanation of those differences must say so and diverge from - and hence be critical of - the racists. Whether actors' beliefs are valid is an important fact about them which often has consequences for what happens. There may also be structures, such as those of patriarchy, which tend to reproduce the misunderstandings which are in the interest of dominant groups. Therefore, as the basic rationale of critical social science argues, we may have to be critical of practices and the ideas behind them in order to explain them and their effects (Fay, 1975; Bhaskar, 1979, Collier, 1994).

Non-relativists consider that there is some connection between conceptions of the good and human flourishing; thus the normative judgement that a starving person should be given food is grounded in a conception of what their needs really are. Although needs are always interpreted via particular cultural conventions, some needs are transcultural. Likewise the normative judgement that at some level human beings are of equal worth is grounded in an understanding of what human beings are like and what their needs are (See Doyal and Gough, 1991; Nussbaum, 1992).

While this non-relativist standpoint is undoubtedly difficult to defend, particularly where it goes beyond basic needs like that for food, the relativist option, with its neutral 'god's-eye view', is, on closer inspection, worse. Not only does relativism render resistance and struggle arbitrary, that is, lacking any defensible justification, but it also generates contradictions, including a theory-practice inconsistency on the part of the observer. A consistent conventionalist/relativist would be torn between reporting or at least implying that there was no justification for anti-racists' struggle (for there are no grounds for any values beyond mere convention) and saying that it was as justified as any other (which would also mean including racist actions). Moreover, moral scepticism or agnosticism involves denying what most of our actions presuppose:

"Moral judgment is what we 'always already' exercise in virtue of being immersed in a network of human relationships that constitute our life together. Whereas there can be reasonable debate about whether or not to exercise juridical, military, therapeutic, aesthetic or even political judgment, in the case of moral judgment this option is not there. The domain of the moral is so deeply enmeshed with those interactions that constitute our lifeworld that to withdraw from moral judgment is tantamount to ceasing to interact, to talk and act in the human community." (Benhabib, 1992, pp. 125-6, emphasis in original. See also Habermas, 1990).

Of course in contemplative mode we may temporarily suspend certain moral judgements, but we cannot act in the social world without making some such judgements. Everyday conversation and action includes and presupposes claims to validity - based on grounds that force us into yes or no positions:

"Thus, built into the structure of action oriented to reaching understanding is an element of unconditionality. And it is this unconditional element that makes the validity that we claim for our views different from the mere de facto acceptance of habitual practices. From the perspective of first persons, what we consider justified is not a function of custom but a question of justification or grounding." [even, we might add, if it turns out to be a mistaken justification.] (Habermas, 1990, p.19).

Social scientists are guilty of contradiction if they unreflexively project their professional third person or observer's stance onto those whom they study or indeed onto their own lives.

Although not all critical social scientists acknowledge that their work has normative, especially moral, standpoints, this is a condition of their work being critical (Sayer, 1997b; Young, 1990). Using terms such as 'oppression', 'domination', 'racism' 'exploitation' etc., implies normative evaluation. If we ask what is wrong with any of these we expect rational defences of the judgements and not answers which merely appeal to convention, to 'what we do round here'. Although 'morality' tends to be regarded with suspicion in progressive movements such as



feminism, their critiques are in the strongest sense moral, in that they concern how people treat one another. Certainly, moral norms and rhetoric can serve to camouflage domination but any studies which regard all moral discourse and actions in this way deny themselves any basis for criticising the phenomena they study.

A second mistake is to see morality as nothing more than a disguised form of instrumental, opportunistic, self-interested action, typically involving attempts to win praise or other rewards. This view, associated with Mandeville and Hobbes, was countered by Adam Smith who pointed out that a diagnostic characteristic of morality is that actions are taken to be good or bad regardless of whether those responsible for them receive praise or condemnation (Smith, 1759, p. 113ff; O'Neill, this volume). Of course this is not to say that the appearance of moral concern cannot be used disingenuously to conceal other motives, but that does not mean all action is of this kind.

While it is possible in theory to abstract out the moral from the instrumental and the conscious from the habitual, in practice behaviour is often shaped by mixed motives and influences. If we do consciously decide on a course of action it is often both because we feel it is the right thing to do in itself and because it happens to have beneficial consequences for us. Thus within organisations people may be friendly to one another both because they feel that is the proper way to behave towards others and because it will make it easier to get things done if they do so. One does not necessarily cancel out the other; the presence on some occasions of instrumental motives does not mean that there are not also moral considerations of what is right and good in itself. Cynical views of the world are not necessarily more correct for being cynical.

Turning to judgements of taste and utility, here again we find that to refuse to acknowledge that any such judgements might be valid generates problems for both explanation and critique. Recent cultural studies has rejected hierarchical distinctions between high and popular culture. One way of responding to elitist derogation of the latter is to adopt a relativist/conventionalist standpoint in which values regarding consumption and taste have nothing to do with the qualities of their objects or referents and nothing can be deemed better than anything else. Ironically this has the effect of disqualifying actors' own appeals to such qualities as reasons for liking things, as if what they liked was purely a matter of arbitrary convention and peer group pressure. The relativist view therefore actually demeans those it is intended to support. In fact non-relativist conceptions of value need not be elitist - they can as easily work in favour of popular culture as against. Moreover, a non-relativist view is needed to avoid flipping from elitism of high culture to a sycophantic view of popular culture on the other.

It is one thing to challenge an existing hierarchy of values as unjustified, but quite another to suppose that no hierarchy of values could ever be justified, for valuation is precisely about discriminating between better and worse, and as we noted above, value judgement is unavoidable. Unless we acknowledge this, the phenomena of social distinction and symbolic struggle, envy, disdain - are unintelligible, for they appear to be only accidentally connected to particular beliefs, practices and artefacts, never connected to them for good reason. Capitalism gives those with sufficient money plenty of scope not only to indulge their vanity through conspicuous consumption but to acquire goods which are genuinely superior to others. The rich are not necessarily fools: if big houses were no better than damp shacks no-one would envy them for owning big houses. By the same token the poor are not fools for envying them, though there is a crucial difference between envying and admiring. While academics who fear the charges of foundationalism and elitism may hesitate to endorse any hierarchy of values, those whom they study (and academics themselves when marking essays or off-duty) know very well that some things are better than others and that such distinctions are not merely arbitrary just because they are not absolute.

One of the most important contributions of cultural studies has been in analyzing how judgements of taste are related to the social position of actors and associated with struggles for distinction. Here I want to comment on some aspects of Pierre Bourdieu's work and his economic analysis of culture. Such an approach is particularly relevant in this context, for we have distinguished culture from economy in terms of a contrast between the former's dialogical nature and concern with non-instrumental values and the latter's instrumental



character (see Introduction). For Bourdieu, social action is determined primarily by deeply sedimented dispositions and semi-conscious instrumental action. Through his concepts of cultural, social and symbolic capital, he shows how social practice involves hidden struggles for benefits in the form of goodwill and status which can be drawn upon to their possessors' advantage. While under certain conditions these forms of capital may be converted to economic capital (and back) they can also function somewhat independently of money and wealth. It should be noted that Bourdieu applies this theory to pre-capitalist societies as much as capitalist ones (e.g. Bourdieu, 1977); it is not a specific response to the economised culture of capitalism. Now an economic view of culture is bound to be an instrumental one, and as such, I wish to argue that it is one-sided and misleading, even for a highly instrumentalised society such as our own.

In his major work, *Distinction*, subtitled - 'a social critique of the judgement of taste' - Bourdieu argues via his concept of habitus that our judgements are overwhelmingly shaped by the dispositions that we develop through our particular socialisation and through our situations within, and trajectories through, the social field (Bourdieu, 1986). Hence what we imagine is a matter of disinterested judgement of taste on purely aesthetic values is actually strongly constrained and enabled by our particular habitus; thus we try to make a virtue of necessity, refusing what we are refused and choosing what is effectively chosen for us. In addition to this, Bourdieu sees taste in instrumental terms, involving strategies of distinction, albeit - in somewhat oxymoronic fashion - unconscious ones (Alexander, 1995). Thus the tastes of the petit bourgeois reflect a constant struggle to distinguish themselves from those above and below, and the whole social field as a whole is characterized by struggles to define and obtain the various kinds of capital and to convert them into the most advantageous form.

Impressive though *Distinction* is, it tends to sociologise values as matters capable of rational assessment out of existence and to render all action and judgement as instrumental, albeit in a semi- or un-conscious form. It rejects explanations of taste in terms of what actors think is good in itself rather than merely conventional for, and consistent with, their position within the social field, and moral-political motives are either ignored or treated as mere convention-following and/or as disguised strategies of distinction. Thus someone who is not acquisitive on the grounds that he or she considers that excessive acquisitiveness is morally wrong, is treated as either rationalising their inability to afford to be acquisitive or as sufficiently well-endowed with cultural capital to be able to win distinction without engaging in conspicuous consumption. This may be correct of course, but a total, *a priori* refusal of the assumption that actors' normative reasoning is not reducible wholly to these sociological and instrumental aspects is untenable. Thus if we take a particular genre, such as opera, we do indeed find that its acolytes have a distinctive position in the social field. However, we cannot explain the valuations of such people of particular practices within the genre without reference to non-social qualities (see also Frith, 1989; McGuigan, 1996). There may be good reasons to do with habitus why art dealers are more likely than builders to appreciate opera, but this does not explain why they would prefer to hear it sung by Pavarotti rather than me. Furthermore while Bourdieu insists that his own tastes are what one would expect of someone with his background he does not of course explain his methodological preferences in this way, but rather by reasoning in terms of their intrinsic value. Equally the reason why I and many others appreciate his work is not merely because of our habitus or because we are involved in unconscious strategies of distinction - trying to ingratiate ourselves with academic colleagues - but rather because his work is exceptionally good, and we would be able to argue the case. Here we have an instance of the inconsistency noted earlier between many social scientists' third person accounts which refuse or ignore reasoned judgement by actors and their first person accounts of their own actions. Moreover, while Bourdieu certainly demonstrates the social correlates of judgements of taste, he does not adequately explain why doing so should amount to a critique, for if judgements of taste can only be disguises for struggles over social distinction, then there is nothing that is being repressed or lost which we could regret. Bourdieu's *Distinction* produces a universal deflation of actors' normative claims, presenting them as no more than emanations and rationalisations of their habitus, and as unconscious strategies for the defence and achievement of status, a status which has no defensible grounding. The struggles of the social field are apparently merely for power, not (also) over what is good or right or just or worthy of distinction.



Bourdieu's concept of capital needs to be qualified, for as it stands, it fails to distinguish between investments in goods - such as education, culture, social relations - from the point of view of their use-value as it were, and investments from the point of view of their exchange-value, that is, in terms of what advantages (or disadvantages) they bring in the struggles of the social field. In relation to all Bourdieu's forms of capital - cultural, educational, linguistic, social and symbolic - this distinction is vital from both an explanatory and a critical point of view. Thus I may 'value' some people as friends, appreciating their sense of humour, intelligence, sensitivity, loyalty or whatever, but if I value them as social contacts, able to 'open doors' for me and bring me monetary and non-monetary rewards, then they become social capital for me. Getting an education, enjoying music, making friends may contingently give one educational, cultural and social capital, but to treat the former as the same as the latter is a disastrous mistake.

The use-value/exchange-value distinction as developed by Aristotle, and later Marx, is crucial (Meikle, 1995). Marx insisted on distinguishing capital from mere machines, materials or buildings. The latter have use-value, but only become capital when they are acquired in order to command the labour or tribute of others and to earn exchange-value. In equivalent fashion we might insist on a difference between 'investments' - say in education - made for their own sake (for example, learning German) and investments made in order to enhance the possessor's social standing (educational capital). Of course, the use-value of education includes an instrumental dimension - enabling one to communicate with people who speak a different language, or whatever - as well as a possible intrinsic interest, but this is different from instrumentalisation in order to gain social advantage vis-a-vis others, and a separate issue from any unintended effects it may have in terms of cultural and social capital. One would expect this distinction to be elided in a highly commodified society, given that peoples' livelihoods depend on exchange-value: but while the use-value/exchange-value distinction is elided in liberal economics, one would not expect this to be the case in a critical analysis of a highly commodified culture. In being overly critical of actors' ability to make judgements of use-value, in the broad sense in which I have used it, Bourdieu's analysis ironically becomes uncritical.

Social action is not wholly reducible to the effects of habitus and disguised battles for status over taste; it also involves judgements regarding the moral worth of particular actions or ways of life. It is apparent from his comments in interview regarding his politics that Bourdieu sees the unmasking of such strategies as an important political task (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992), which it is. But by excluding moral issues, he ironically and presumably inadvertently contributes to the aestheticisation and instrumentalisation of practice in contemporary capitalist society.

Morality and modernity

I now want to consider some key themes in the relationship between morality and modernity, first mainly from the side of culture, then from the side of economy. In recent years there have been divergent tendencies in relation to morality and modernity: on the one hand there has been an evident rise in interest in moral and political philosophy, which owes much to the rise of new social movements and their related critical social sciences (e.g. Benhabib, 1992; Young, 1990) as well as critical theory (e.g. Habermas, 1990); on the other hand in more postmodern quarters, 'ethical disidentification' (Connor, 1993) has been dominant.

(i) Detraditionalization

The relationship between modernity and morality is double-edged. The usual story is that the upheavals, rationalisation and disenchantment of modernity have changed the nature of social relations from conventional and moral to contractual. What had previously been social relations in which how one ought to behave was dictated by the particular obligations traditionally attaching to the position into which one was born, gave way to contractual relations or at least relations subject to reflection and deliberation on the part of individuals. On the other hand, the freeing of people from such pre-modern ties, coupled with the bringing of more and more aspects of life under critical scrutiny, obliges them to develop their own 'post-conventional' or 'post-traditional' norms. Once normative value judgements had been severed from binding social relations they became the subject of choices exercised by



sovereign liberal subjects (McMylor, 1994). This can be seen negatively in terms of a 'de-moralization' of society and a slide into an anarchy of choice or preference in which individuals simply choose the conception of the good that suits them. Alternatively, and more positively, actors are freed to make judgements according to principles rather than tradition. At the same time, their liberation can be seen as coming at the price of taking on a moral burden not experienced by their predecessors precisely because they become responsible for determining what is moral (Poole, 1991; Wolfe, 1989). With 'de-traditionalisation', existing, conventional social relations and actions are critically evaluated. Even where this does not result in change, and traditions are retained, they are so on the basis of comparison with alternatives rather than merely being accepted without question (Beck, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995).

Early moral and political philosophers such as those of the Scottish Enlightenment were much exercised by the challenge posed by this burden and attempted to formulate a rational science of morality. In such work there is no clear distinction between positive and normative theory. Subsequently, such ambitions were largely abandoned and moral and political philosophy became separated off from positive social science, reflecting the growth of liberal hostility to prescriptions of the good and the associated rise of a division between ethics (private) and politics (public).

(ii) instrumentality v intrinsic values

Another concern of commentators on modernity has been the enlargement of the scope of instrumental action at the expense of action based on intrinsic values. In what MacIntyre terms 'practices', such as sports or academic disciplines, the standards governing action are internal, both regulating and being regulated by the practitioners (MacIntyre, 1981; Keat, 1994). But if practices or their products are then commodified, they become subject to external judgement, including that of outsiders who may have little or no understanding of the practice. More importantly, money, rather than internal goods, comes to regulate the activity. Thus, if we commodify degree courses, we increasingly teach what will sell rather than what we think is worth teaching in itself. In Habermas's terms, system - in particular the self-regulating economy - comes to colonise the lifeworld. Strategic action in response to external commands and signals (especially price signals) increasingly overrides the practical reason (including deliberation over moral-political issues) supposedly characteristic of the lifeworld. In Marxian terms, our activities become controlled by economic forces operating behind our backs, rather than under our control.

Within organisations, instrumentalisation attempts to take advantage of what otherwise would be considered largely intrinsic virtues, such as diligence, creativity and the ability to communicate, by using them to achieve external goals. In so doing instrumental rationalisation is often assumed to 'drain' human activities and relationships of their normative significance (Poole, p.85). The loss of normative significance results both from the narrowing of the range of tasks in which each is involved and from the lengthening of the chain between producer and consumer. But division of labour also brings important benefits, such as allowing some people to become full-time specialist scientists, musicians or sportsmen and women, and hence in a position to advance their specialism beyond that possible without this division of labour. Once these become ways of earning a living they may become subject to the influence of those who fund them - tax payers and consumers, and whose goals may be external to those of the producers, though since it is to such others that the producers owe their living, this hardly seems unreasonable.

All these considerations are hugely important for any critique of modernity, but there are important qualifications to make to them.

Firstly, these arguments involve a kind of philosophical and sociological reductionism and a priorism; having reduced concrete objects such as economies, organisations or communities to abstract principles or ideal types, such as those of 'practical reason', 'the market', or 'bureaucracy', it is then assumed that concrete behaviour can be adequately described by them. Take, for example, Bauman's bleak view of bureaucracy, based on an ideal type of this form of organisation (Bauman, 1995). While instrumental rationalisation is undoubtedly prominent in such organisations, there are also likely to be countervailing forces, as when



workers reverse the instrumentalisation and take advantage of the scope for sociability afforded by belonging to a large organisation and put this before meeting its external goals (though of course they have to disguise this sufficiently to avoid being sacked). This, after all, is an important attraction of having a job aside from as a source of income. Similarly, inferences about behaviour in market societies based purely on abstract principles of 'the market' (as in Poole, 1991 and McMyler, 1994) involve two kinds of reduction - firstly from society to markets, as if the former consisted only of markets, and secondly through the assumption that when one is in a market situation, one is governed by market forces alone. Against this it must be remembered that there are always other things going on both outside and within markets and bureaucracies. The effect of these reductionist characterisations of modernity is not neutral: they inevitably produce understandings whose negativity jars with the real or apparent acceptability of contemporary society to many of its members.

Secondly, although capitalism encourages and indeed requires an instrumental approach to activity on the part of producers, for final consumers the point of buying commodities is primarily for their use-value, though they may also in some cases function instrumentally as means towards the end of winning approval or envy of others, or in Bourdieu's terms, as capital.

Thirdly, as Nancy Fraser points out in her critique of Habermas, the distinction between system and life-world can only be aligned with a distinction between economy and state on the one side and family or community on the other at the cost of gross mystification. Capitalism does not exhaust the economy, for households are also involved in material as well as symbolic reproduction and hence have an economic dimension, while relations within markets and capitalist organisations also have a moral-cultural dimension. Although instrumental action is more strongly represented in the formal capitalist economy than outside it is not absent in domestic situations (Fraser, 1991). Families (and communities) are never solely structured by norms, and even to the extent that they are, they are rarely arrived at democratically; the home is also a site in which exploitation, instrumentality, violence and power are common. Moreover, insofar as lifeworld still influences the state and the formal economy, patriarchal power remains significant there too. One of the most beneficial effects of the cultural turn has been an increased awareness of oppression in the lifeworld, and hence a realisation of the dangers of reducing modernity to capitalism. Oppression in the capitalist economy is mainly system-related and to do with distribution; in Giddens' terms, it is based on allocative power through the control of the means of production, rather than on symbolic or authoritative power (Giddens, 1979). The converse is true for patriarchy and racism, though of course they structure social relations within the formal capitalist economy as well as in the household economy, and the inequalities they generate are routinely taken advantage of by capitalist interests, whether in the super-exploitation of oppressed groups or the conversion of symbolic capital into economic capital.

Fourthly, there is a further fundamental flaw in the critique of instrumentality. Quite simply, instrumental action should not be seen as necessarily inferior to action based on non-instrumental values, for the former may be directed towards good ends while the latter may be bad. When reading about morality, virtue and conceptions of the good, it is easy to forget that racists, snobs, misogynists and homophobes all have certain intrinsic values. Hence aspects of life governed by such norms (social integration) are not necessarily better than those dominated by instrumental rationality (system integration). If the domestic sphere is treated as a prime case of social integration, Habermas's critique comes too close to treating it as 'a haven-in-a-heartless-world'. Although the formal economy is dominated by instrumental reason and the family less so, many people may find relationships in the organisations where they are employed more satisfactory than those at home. For many women, entering the labour market - commodifying their labour power - freed them from worse circumstances in the home. This is a contemporary equivalent of the liberation of people from traditional conventional power relations by market forces noted in theories of the transition from feudalism to capitalism. Moreover, it has long been argued that markets can have a 'civilizing influence' where they oblige actors to put profit before prejudice in decisions of who to employ and who to sell to (Hirschman, 1982; Sayer, 1995).



These points are not advanced in order to reject the critique of instrumentalisation but rather to qualify it. Critiques of instrumentalisation and markets such as Habermas' are impressive in their sweep but they do not enable us to read off and judge the concrete quality of life in capitalist societies. We need to be rigorously ambivalent about this aspect of modernity. However, turning to recent cultural studies, we find a different kind of slant on capitalism and (post-)modernity, one which highlights a more positive face, while often forgetting what is worth retaining in the older critiques. The most striking differences are perhaps the validation of popular culture and the celebration of the creative possibilities for constructing identities through consumption of commodities and discursive strategies. This could be seen as merely bending the stick to counter the implicitly negative view of consumption of commodities in traditional critical theory and to flush out any elitism from critiques of the commodification of practices, but there is a great danger of simply forgetting what is valid in the critique of instrumentality and commodification.

(iii) aesthetics versus morality

A third concern of critiques of modernity focusses on the dangers of moral judgement giving way to aesthetic considerations. Morality matters in a way which aesthetics does not. While we might argue with someone about what is beautiful, failure to reach agreement is not as serious as in an argument about how we should treat one another, indeed in the case of aesthetics we might enjoy difference. Failing to persuade someone of the quality of a painting is less serious than failing to persuade them not to be racist.

The problem is that this ranking of moral-political values and aesthetic values is often reversed, as when politicians or employees are judged on their looks rather than their policies or ability. For producers of consumer products and services, success depends on the aesthetic and affective qualities of their product as well as any functional adequacy they may have. Recent cultural studies have emphasized how consumption is increasingly serving as a means of identity construction. Although consumption may be active and creative rather than passive, it is hard to resist the conclusion that often this means that appearance becomes more important than how people behave towards others. This aestheticization goes beyond the direct effects of purchasing commodities. Pervasive media images also provide a prism through which a great number of objects and events can be classified. As regards pop culture, Lash and Urry argue:

"The negative consequences of this are that the ubiquity and centrality of such popular culture objects to youth lifestyle can swamp the moral-practical categories available to young people. And entities and events which would otherwise be classified and judged by moral-political universals are judged instead through these aesthetic, taste categories." (1994, p.133)

Thus moral-political aspects of culture become reduced to matters of taste, and politics is directed towards the cultivation of style and the nurturing of an individualised, subjective, 'feelgood factor'. This kind of 'de-valuation' is entirely in line with what one would expect of a deeply commodified culture.

Theories of culture which conceive it in terms of the stylization of life (e.g. Featherstone, 1994), and ignore the moral-political dimension, could be said to be complicit in this tendency for aesthetic judgements to take the place of moral ones. The aestheticization of politics may on occasion be impressive and have progressive intentions and effects, but it can of course be used for any purpose, fair or foul. It can lead to groups being celebrated or dismissed on the grounds of presentation rather than the content of the views. A cultural studies which ignores the moral-political content of culture and considers only aesthetics therefore hardly deserves to be called critical.

Valuing Economy: Moral Economy

So far I have been critical mainly of cultural studies' approach to values, but political economy's disregard of (non-economic) values is equally problematic. Even though radical political economy rejects neoclassical economics' assumption that economic behaviour is overwhelmingly self-interested, it generally fails to probe the moral-political sentiments that might actually or potentially motivate it. To be sure, there has been much written of late on



how economic relationships presuppose trust (Miztal, 1996), but trust is quite compatible with purely self-interested action. Beyond this, economic activities have in varying degrees a moral dimension. Both in order to examine this, and to subject economic activities - formal and informal - to normative scrutiny, I now want to propose that it would be helpful to revive and adapt the concept of 'moral economy' for understanding both culture and economy and the relation between them.

Pre-capitalist economies are sometimes termed moral economies in order to register the extent to which their economic processes were normatively regulated, in contrast to contemporary capitalism, where, as we have seen, system supposedly colonises lifeworld. Yet even though we are increasingly subject to economic forces over which we have no control, economies are still regulated or at least influenced by such norms. This is the most politically-significant way in which economy is culturally inflected.

The moral economy embodies norms regarding the responsibilities and rights of individuals and institutions with respect to others and regarding the nature and qualities of goods, services and environment. These norms shape both the formal and informal, including household, economies. While the norms may be considered part of a moral order, they are invariably influenced by networks of power and considerations of cost; indeed many such norms are compromised by, or are rationalisations of, the effects of economic power. The story of capitalism and modernity is often told as one of the replacement of moral economy by a political economy, in which the fate of actors comes to depend on the outcomes of anonymous contending market forces, the positioning of people as consumers turns moral judgements concerning the social good into matters of private preference, and their fortunes become heavily dependent on luck, as even market advocates such as Hayek, acknowledge. Polanyi's critique of the commodification of labour-power, recently taken up by authors such as Will Hutton and Maurice Glasman, is directed at a major instance of this de-moralization (Polanyi, 1944; Hutton, 1995; Glasman, 1995).

However, there is a danger of exaggerating the extent to which these changes have been at the expense of the influence of moral norms (e.g. Poole, 1991; McMylor, 1994), especially if we overlook the way in which markets and other economic institutions are socially-embedded, and if we ignore families, communities and other non-market relations and organisations (Wolfe, 1989). Particularly in the latter but even in the formal economy, the influence of moral norms is still significant (Storper and Salais, 1996). As Etzioni has argued in his 'I/we paradigm', even in market situations, both as buyers and sellers, we tend to have to balance desire and self-interest with moral commitments, although the incentives of the former may be more powerful than the latter (Etzioni, 1988).

What is ethical and unethical is of course contentious. While we may refer to the moral economy in a neutral, descriptive way, we may actually judge it negatively as unethical. I therefore don't want to give an unqualified endorsement to the moral economy as it stands. For those who are oppressed by it, markets - especially the labour market - may offer an escape, as we saw in the case of married women. Consequently practices, like market exchange, which corrode the moral economy are not necessarily bad. In any case, as Smith anticipated, and Hayek later argued, where there is an advanced social division of labour with millions of producers and consumers spread across large parts of the world, producers cannot know what others want independently of feedback from markets.

For our society the fundamental questions of moral economy might include the following:

- whose keeper are we? who is our keeper? - what are our responsibilities towards children, the elderly, the disabled and infirm, to distant others and future generations, and to the environment?
- what standards of care and provision should we expect to receive, give and fund? i.e. what goods should be provided?;
- how should we discharge our responsibilities to others?; through paying taxes to fund transfer payments, through direct unpaid labour?; by paying others to do the work?;



- how should these responsibilities be allocated between men and women, between parents and non-parents, between different age-groups, between people of different incomes and wealth?;
- what standard of living should people expect? should there be limits on pay and income from capital?;
- to what extent should people be reliant on wages/salaries for their income? (how far should income be subject to the 'stark utopia' of the 'self-adjusting' market? (Polanyi, 1944)).
- what things should not be commodified?

Of course, in a sense many of these are academic questions, for in practice the arrangements to which they refer depend heavily on the working of the economic system and on convention and power (in the life-world as well as system) rather than being decided normatively in any considered manner. However, from a normative point of view - and any critical social science presupposes such a standpoint - they are crucial to any assessment of economy in the broad sense. As we have seen, modernity is associated with the rise of post-conventional morality, in which people are burdened with moral decisions which are no longer solved for them by religion and custom. If this is the case, it would be odd to write off moral economy as a thing of the past.

The moral economy as it currently exists is clearly strongly gendered, both in terms of the nature of many of the norms themselves and the expectations regarding who is expected to meet them; in its gendered form it is therefore a major target of feminism, which, in effect, exposes its immoral side. In this area, de-traditionalisation still has a long way to go. The most important example of the persistence of traditional morality in modern society concerns conceptions of the responsibilities of mothers, and also, complimenting this, the view of many men that their responsibilities to their partners and children consist largely of being breadwinner, and perhaps gendered role model. From a normative point of view, a minimum condition for a truly 'moral' economy would be the overthrow of gendering of responsibilities for the provision of parental and other care. This would involve not only an equalisation with regard to what women and men do but a re-evaluation of the responsibilities themselves. However, while this would amount to a re-moralisation of economy, de-traditionalization does not automatically follow this course, and indeed it could lead to widespread refusals of moral responsibilities.

A key component of the moral economy is the welfare state, though some authors regard its bureaucratisation of responsibilities as reducing individuals' sense of moral obligations (e.g. Ignatieff, 1985; Wolfe, 1989). Both through its expenditure and its own employment generation, the welfare state influences the economy and structure of households, and the life-courses of individuals within it (Esping-Andersen, 1994). Conversely, changing conventions and norms regarding gender and families put new demands on the welfare state. During the long postwar boom, forms of welfare which supported traditional family arrangements and ways of life needed little defence in ethical terms because their provision had been routinised and bureaucratised and hence removed from conscious individual responsibility, and there were few dissenting voices anyway. The moral economy of the idealised family was of course immoral and oppressive. With the combination of the break-up of those traditions, the welfare state's support for them comes under question. The crisis of the welfare state is therefore not only a fiscal one, exacerbated by globalisation and the related squeeze on public sectors and national social settlements, but a consequence of the disarray of the moral economy, which has thrown many of the above normative questions wide open (Mitchell and Goody, 1997).

Talk of responsibilities has recently come to be associated with conservative forms of communitarianism (e.g. Etzioni, 1994), and hence not surprisingly is regarded with deep suspicion on the Left. However, to treat all responsibilities as oppressive and unjustified is to lapse into an anti-social, adolescent or puerile anarchism: the problem is not responsibilities per se, but their definition and allocation. In a post-traditional moral economy, it should be possible to negotiate these matters democratically, rather than simply hoping to duck them. Often, the Left's suspicion of morality talk as the disguise of the powerful tends to lead it to opt



for liberal responses to moral-political dilemmas (i.e. ones which individualize decisions regarding the good) rather than develop better alternative moral norms.

The point of a focus on moral economy is to bring out what is so easily overlooked, that economies are strongly influenced by moral norms and that changing such norms is fundamental to any alternative organisation of economy. This is not reducible to the bland point that economic processes are socially embedded or indeed that they presuppose trust, for it identifies a crucial aspect of that embedding on which trust depends. To develop a critical political economy, we need to appreciate the scope of the often repressed normative questions regarding moral economy.

Conclusions

My intention in entitling this paper 'valuing culture and economy' was not to prioritise one over the other (for which is more important depends on what one is trying to explain) but to put values back into both. Equally I don't wish to prioritise the politics of distribution over the politics of recognition. Rather I have argued that if we are to understand culture or economy or the relationship between them, we need to acknowledge the role of values concerning the nature of the good as fundamental to culture and to the regulation of capitalist and household economies. Unless this is done, social theory will tend to absorb rather than critically expose the tendency for values to be relativized and subjectivised with the development of liberal market societies.

Detraditionalisation, instrumentalisation and the aestheticization of politics and recognition are all to be expected in a capitalist society. Whether they are progressive or regressive depends on the values in question and what happens to them. In principle, detraditionalisation seems progressive but it may of course merely lead to more individualistic and selfish behaviour. Instrumentalisation may drain or appear to drain activities of their intrinsic value, but this does not mean that it is always retrograde, for the values being weakened may be reactionary. Although it is important for critical social science to identify hidden instrumental strategies and power relations behind apparently innocent and disinterested action, to characterise all behaviour in this fashion suppresses recognition of any possible emancipatory alternatives. The aestheticisation of politics may be used by progressive or reactionary movements. It may draw attention to hitherto ignored groups and causes, but it can also distract attention from what the causes are about, and disqualify those whose image does not fit. Instrumentalisation and aestheticisation are not unrelated to capitalist society, they are encouraged by competition for sales and political support.

Similarly, understanding economies - household as well as capitalist - depends on acknowledging the nature and extent of their moral regulation, and a critical approach requires us to evaluate such norms. In the absence of this, even radicals may note specific problems such as exploitation, while taking the wider moral economy for granted. For these reasons, and as a parting thought, we might consider reviving - albeit in a new mode - the link that existed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries between the normative discourse of moral and political philosophy and the discourse of political economy.

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