

## ***Robert Babe (2009) Cultural Studies and Political Economy. Towards a new integration***

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Robert Babe's latest work consists of an analysis of the intellectual division that emerged between writers in cultural studies and political economy. The book is divided in two parts. Part one titled 'Genealogies' and part two 'Portals for Dialogue', which is mainly an overview of previously published material designed to propose a narrative for a way forward between the two disciplines. The author argues on page four that it is the poststructuralists who are responsible for taking cultural studies in a different direction to that of the ideas of its original founder figures. So dominant has poststructuralism become that its ideas do not simply dominate cultural studies but rather have over the years become synonymous with it and this has led to the division between the two above-mentioned camps.

The first part of the book contains two chapters that are fundamental to an understanding of cultural materialism or critical cultural studies. The first chapter titled 'Genealogy of Political Economy' focuses on two writers who in this context are normally absent from such debates. The first is Theodore Adorno and the other is Harold Innis. The author argues that Adorno 'is seldom identified as an inaugurator of critical political economy of media' (18) and: 'As with Adorno, I propose here that Innis seamlessly weaved together aspects of what are now known as cultural studies and political-economic analyses of media ...'. The aim then is to recognise each contribution which will help towards 're-establishing conversations between cultural studies and political economy' (ibid).

With respect to Adorno, the author argues that the 'Culture Industry' serves as an 'analytical category' (24) for an analysis of media and moreover it incorporates the concerns of political economy and cultural studies without over emphasising or underestimating economy in cultural production. Robert Babe demonstrates the similarities between Adorno and the Canadian writer Harold Innis who both use 'materialist perspectives on media and culture' (42) which in the case of Innis can be found in his writings concerning his 'staples thesis' and 'medium theory'. Perhaps more interestingly is how Innis demonstrates how 'thought

systems' are organised which is akin to Adorno's use of social psychology.

In the following chapter titled 'Genealogy of Cultural Studies' under subtitle 'What is Cultural Studies?' (61) the author begins with a critique of those writers that have claimed cultural studies has no centre to speak of and states that: 'cultural studies is not nearly as formless or inchoate ...' (62) as some have argued. This is important because the author is out to demonstrate how the method of analysis and concerns of cultural materialism is central to cultural studies. This also serves another purpose and that is to demonstrate how far removed cultural studies is today from its original position by showing the clear differences between poststructuralist cultural studies and cultural materialism. In sum, Post-structuralism with its obsession with language and a semiotic analysis without material basis is responsible for what has evolved into a conservative and 'status quo affirming' (64) discipline losing its radical-critical edge in the process. The key to understanding the intentions of the author is here: 'I will argue in this book that in fact the differences between poststructuralists and political economists today are no greater than they are with cultural materialists, that indeed the differences are identical' (ibid).

One important issue, hitherto unresolved, is the question of how much influence economic matters have in the distribution of content over the public. Critics of 'economism' claim that it reduces everything to the point of economy which becomes dictatorial in its ubiquitous output and pays scant attention to reception. Robert Babe shows how Raymond Williams was concerned with the dialectical relationship between 'transmission' and 'reception' (72) which prioritises neither but acknowledges a complex relationship that evolves into states of being. Williams had therefore developed a 'unity' between 'cultural studies and political economy' (72) and this is cultural materialism, a distant memory for poststructuralist thinkers.

The division between poststructuralists and political economists of communication centre round the economic base-superstructure theory, false consciousness and human agency. Babe highlights how poststructuralists have effectively abandoned economy as a viable category of analysis for understanding culture and power, preferring language as *the* point of analysis. This would seem to prove that the two positions are irreconcilable because political economists continue to stress the importance of economy in any given assessment of culture. Indeed the two disciplines with two very different approaches appear to

be two immovable forces, but despite this the author argues that it is imperative that reconciliation happens between cultural studies and political economy, and for this to happen it requires abandoning the 'poststructuralist turn' and return cultural studies to its critical origins. It also requires less emphasis by political economy on the base determining cultural outcomes and of writers within cultural studies to include more assessment of economic factors. In sum a 'middle ground' (5) is sought so the author revisits the debates surrounding cultural materialism, which is a discipline that incorporates economy as a factor in cultural production but not one that determines its outcomes over the actions of individuals. Robert Babe argues that writers such as Harold Innis, Theodore Adorno, Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart and E.P. Thompson hold the key to a greater understanding of this complex relationship. Max Horkheimer, who wrote on the culture industry before his collaboration with Adorno would be a welcomed addition.

What's not discussed in the book in any great detail, but is referred to, is where the debate over how influential economy is, actually originates from. Karl Marx's theory of historical materialism or to use its proper term the *materialist conception of history* is based on a metaphor which is titled 'base-superstructure'. As a writer influenced by Marx I've always found it amusing that critics, poststructuralists in this instance, either focus on limited writings of Marx or when referring to issues of economic determinism are actually referring to Karl Kautsky's interpretation of Marx, but conveniently leave that aside.

Kautsky formulated the theory using Darwinian insights on biological evolution thus creating the 'iron law' of development. Although it is true that we can narrowly select texts where Marx overstated natural law, we can nevertheless use other texts of his in conjunction with this process where Marx constantly argued that humans make their own history, even within a world of alienation. Two important texts are *The Holy Family* and *The Eighteenth Brumaire Louis Bonaparte* and in fact it could be argued that these texts actually reflect the cultural materialism advocated by Raymond Williams. Further to this, Marx's *Theses on Feurbach* is a scathing attack against materialist/economic philosophy and although the *Theses* is a polemic, purposely so, it makes the valid point that human activity can never be negated in the process within modes of production.

For his part, Williams wrote a chapter titled 'Determination' in *Marxism and Literature* which follows on from a chapter titled 'Base and Superstructure'; the latter critiqued as a viable model for understanding cultural production. Under 'Dertermination' Williams begins thus: 'No

problem in Marxist cultural theory is more difficult than that of “determination”. The point Williams made is that ‘determination’ is central to Marxism; the point is how much? The following chapter ‘Productive Forces’ which as Williams states is both central to Marxism and ‘Marxist cultural theory’ (90) is developed to highlight the contradiction between Marx’s idea of productive forces and its nemesis base-superstructure, which has come to dominate debates on Marxism. In sum, ‘productive forces’ is a far more broad, even totalising concept that allows for serious reflection on the production of ideas not limited by the material base. ‘It is all and any of the means of the production and reproduction of real life’ (91 in *Marxism and Literature*) and: ‘...in this human historical process, we produce ourselves and our societies, and it is within these developing and variable forms that “material production”, then itself variable, both in mode and scope, is itself carried on’ (ibid). Finally, with respect to Williams, it’s worth quoting from a chapter in his book rarely mentioned and this is the final chapter titled ‘Creative Practice’ where he begins thus:

‘At the centre of Marxism is an extraordinary emphasis on human creativity and self-creation’ (206) and ‘Creative practice is thus of many kinds. It is already, and actively, our practical consciousness. When it becomes struggle—the active struggle for new consciousness through new relationships that is the ineradicable emphasis of the Marxist sense of self-creation—it can take many forms’ (212).

As Robert Babe argues (77) Williams forwarded a theory of ‘social totality’ against the base determining the superstructure, but it’s important to note that this isn’t an abandonment of Marxism it is rather as I’ve detailed above a shift towards the productive forces as instrumental to understanding historical materialism. As the author rightly claims Williams’ view of the total, comprising I may add the productive forces, underpinned his theory of cultural studies. This point is taken further on page 88: ‘What is most striking about the documents inaugurating critical cultural studies, whether authored by Adorno or by the British theorists (or by Gramsci for that matter) is the seamless integration of cultural, political and economic matters’. Therefore the divide that currently exists between political economy and the poststructuralist version of cultural studies was never there in the early days of cultural/media analysis. Moreover, within this context is included an acknowledgment concerning levels of interpretation pitted against a ‘soft determinism’ (169). This is a criticism against crude economism preferring to award a degree of freedom to read, view and interpret *within* an economic framework and not totally governed *by* it. What Robert Babe refers to as the *dialectic of*

*information* is contained in the writings of ‘Innis, Adorno, Williams, Hoggart and Thompson...’ (ibid). On the other hand ‘dialectic thinking’ (45) is rejected by leading poststructuralist thinkers such as Lawrence Grossberg and Mark Poster.

The argument that cultural materialism included the idea of ‘social totality’ is a welcomed reminder to academic understanding concerning media and cultural issues. But perhaps more importantly is Robert Babe’s inclusion of Adorno; a writer more often than not misunderstood and vilified by many writers within the British cultural studies discipline. So in the latter context, the idea that ‘...Adorno’s approach to media studies ... fully integrates critical political economy and cultural studies’ (18) is not so much a reminder to those ‘writers’ who, perhaps because they haven’t read, studied primary texts or simply because they have misunderstood or been extremely selective, but rather a correction.

All of these points make for an interesting read, but it’s also the inclusion of Innis that not simply broadens the range of this book but perhaps more interestingly it’s the comparative positions between Innis, Adorno and Williams that are worthy of mention where ‘Innis focused on the dialectic of medium and message’. Overall, the book not only offers an effective and welcomed critique of what was a disastrous poststructuralist turn and the destructive consequences that has had on cultural studies, but also it brings to us the ideas of Innis, a writer largely and wrongly ignored in media communication. Robert Babe’s insights reminds us not only of the overlapping ideas between Adorno and Innis, but also that: ‘Like Adorno, Innis is seldom singled out as a founder of critical political economy of media’ (21).

Babe offers a convincing, welcomed and timely criticism of poststructuralism with its obsession with language far removed from a material context and it’s worth reading his critique of Poster on pages 184-5 rightly accusing Poster of being ‘naïve’ in his neglect and misunderstanding of material contexts.

Finally, on the point of reintegrating political economy and cultural studies (pages 196-198) the author suggests that poststructuralism be ‘disregarded’; perhaps consigned to history would be more fitting because, as Robert Babe points out, it is conservative in character and has contributed greatly towards maintaining the status quo rather than offering, an effective-radical critique.

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