

Cultural political economy: Discontents and elucidations

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Abstract: This paper is aimed at contributing to the necessary elucidations towards the understanding of cultural political economy (CPE). As a dimension of the generic political economy approach to social scientific investigation, CPE remains characterized by discontents. The contribution attempted locating conceptual and empirical linkages between CPE and (critical) policy studies. It highlights the intricate connection of semiosis with the understanding of cultural political economy. The paper collected and analyzed qualitative data which led to the conclusion that despite contrary tendencies, conceptual meaning-making in cultural political economy, cannot be validly divorced from cultural relativism.

Keywords: Critical political economy, Critical semiotic analysis, Cultural political economy, Political economy, Semiosis

1. Introduction

The generic concept of political economy remains an attractive area of engagement in social science scholarship. Its nuances have historically touched upon the following trajectories: “classical political economy, orthodox political economy, critical political economy, Marxist political economy, institutional political economy, evolutionary political economy, international political economy, positive political economy, new political economy and cultural political economy” (Okeke & Ofuebe, 2014: 523). Jessop (2010: 336) describes cultural political CPE as “a post-disciplinary approach that highlights the contribution of the cultural turn (a concern with semiosis or meaning-making) to the analysis of the articulation between the economic and the political and their embedding in broader sets of social relations”.

More than any other scholar, Bob Jessop is usually credited with the founding of the cultural economy paradigm (Jessop however prefers sharing such credit with Ngai-Ling Sum, also of Lancaster University as himself). The principal exponent or exponents are highlighted in this introductory section because even their own explications have never made it easier for the substance of cultural political economy to be fittingly determined. The purpose of this paper is to attempt to make a contribution to the requisite elucidations. In other words, the paper is aimed at collecting and analyzing data in order to increase knowledge (Chukwuere, 2021). Such knowledge is necessary in properly treating cultural political economy as a component of the generic political economy approach to social science research.

4. What is cultural political economy?

This contribution accordingly resorts to the positions of Jessop and Sum (2010: 445) who have posited that “cultural political economy makes a cultural turn, broadly conceived as an interest in semiosis, to interpret and, in part, explain events, processes, tendencies, and emergent structures in the field of political economy”. These scholars highlight further that “semiosis involves the social production of inter-subjective meaning and, as such, is a foundational moment of all social practices and relations”. Consequently, “combining semiosis and political economy, CPE eschews reduction of economic or political phenomena to their semiotic dimensions (losing sight of their extra-semiotic specificities and dynamic) and the reification of sedimented economic and political relations (ignoring their semiotically and socially constructed contingency)”. Then, Andreichuk (2014: 19) explains that “semiosis can be defined as the process by which representations of

objects function as signs, a process of cooperation between signs, their objects, and their interpretants and an inquiry into the conditions that are necessary in order for representations of objects to function as signs”.

In further attempts at explicating CPE, Biebuyck and Meltzer (2017) see it is a school of thought in political economy which places emphases on how economic systems, inclusive of their integral parts, are the outcomes of specific technical, human and natural associations and despite extensive ancient pedigrees appeared as a component of the “cultural turn” in the discipline of social sciences. According to Biebuyck and Meltzer (2017) therefore, even though cultural political economy is usually regarded as anti-material determinism and countering the negligence of culture in the traditional methodology of political economy, the cultural turn was not necessarily about “adding culture” but more about opposing positivist epistemologies in the social sciences. Consequently, for some scholars, CPE remains definable by an approach bordering on “lifeworld” or cultural variables such as discourse, identity, and gender, in contradiction to traditional political economy’s emphases on the “systems” or material facets. Biebuyck and Meltzer (2017) further depose that this repositioning of the nonmaterial trajectories of political economic life bolsters an intense divide between the material and the cultural, an issue traceable to “the concept of ‘(dis)embedding’ the economy and subordinating society”.

The truth is that from Jessop to Ngai-Ling Sum and other undoubtedly eminent scholars, cultural political economy has benefited from an egregious level of theorizations. This has not however made CPE easily acceptable as another worthwhile trajectory of the political economy school of thought. Cultural political economy accordingly possesses its own share of scholarly discontents.

4.1. A Résumé of discontents

Indeed, “there is no consensus among scholars on the nature of cultural political economy” (Jessop, 2010: 337). According to Biebuyck and Meltzer (2017) therefore, the impact of the “cultural turn” on political economy’s evolution, was not necessarily about “adding culture” than about opposing positivism in social scientific investigation. And if that is the case, what then remains “cultural” in cultural political economy? In Uzomah (2022: 2) culture “means anything pertaining to the sum total of a people’s way of life”. The embedding of culture in the substance of cultural political economy theorization then remains either left to mere imaginations or pushed to the realms of rocket science. Then as if that has not sufficed, Juri Lotman in Andreichuk (2014: 18) sees culture as “a space of mind for the production of semiosis”.

4.2. Summative elucidation

A specific way of meaning-making out of the maze of scenarios presented by CPE is in locating conceptual and empirical interconnections between it and (critical) policy studies. Hence, in a fresh blend of critical political economy and critical semiotic analysis that has immense significance for social and cultural studies, Jessop (2010: 337) presents CPE in five features as follows (1) “the manner in which it grounds the cultural turn in political economy in the existential necessity of complexity reduction (2) its emphasis on the role of evolutionary mechanisms in shaping the movement from social construal to social construction and their implications for the production of hegemony (3) its concern with the interdependence and co-evolution of the semiotic and extra semiotic (4) the significance of technologies, in a broadly Foucauldian sense, to the consolidation of hegemony and its contestation in the remaking of social relations and (5) its de-naturalization of economic and political imaginaries and, hence, its contribution to Ideologiekritik and the critique of specific forms of domination”.

In other words, as elucidated by Cossetta et al. (2020) CPE “highlights the relevance of the cultural dimension (understood as semiosis or meaning making) in the interpretation and explanation of the complexity of social formations such as policies”. Invariably, “it points to the fact that policies always reflect selective interpretations of problems, explanations of their cause, and preferred solutions. Policy makers and policy actors in general, accordingly, need to selectively attribute meaning to some aspects of the world rather than others and engage with pre-existing interpretations of the problems and solutions available to them in the decision-making process”. Cossetta et al. (2020) still emphasize that “CPE is interested in the study of these pre-existing interpretations (policy discourses, economic and political imaginaries), their translation into hegemonic strategies and projects, and their institutionalization into specific structures and practices”.

Against the backdrop of locating the nexus between CPE and critical policy emphases therefore, Cossetta et al. (2020) posit that “the main contribution of the CPE approach to policy analysis is the need to take seriously the importance of the mobilization of policy ideas, and the perceptions of political actors, in the explanation of policy dynamics and policy outcomes. This implies paying specific attention to the role of a

particular set of policy actors and the mechanisms of persuasion and construction of meaning (soft power) that they use to influence the perceptions of other actors". In other words, at the root of cultural political economy is the belief that in theoretical and empirical terms, policy ideas are culturally relative. Devoid of this explicit alignment with cultural relativism, cultural political economy remains needlessly long-drawn-out as social science paradigm.

As argued by Greenwood (1993: 101) "despite our academic preferences, then, we will continue to be surprised about the turns that history takes unless we learn to link the cultural, local, and domestic to the economic, international, and global". This includes our understanding of prevalent social science concepts such as cultural political economy. The need for innovative ideation cannot be overemphasized here. Hence, it has been argued in these regards as follows:

Innovative ideation is a systematic process of generating, developing, and communicating new ideas and solutions. There are two ways of generating innovative ideas related to creativity. One way is creating ideas from nothing. The other way is reengineering existing ideas in new forms to offer a better solution to the problem. Thus, the existing ideas serve as research walls or key insights for birthing the new and innovative ideation (Adom, 2021: 2; Adom, 2014; Björk et al., 2011; Bocken et al., 2011).

Then truly, "knowledge production in the social sciences is not region-dependent" (Okeke & Iloh, 2020: 17). But policy implement-ability is different. When public policies are not culturally aligned, they engender scenarios that border on sedimentary policies, which "are usually, ostensibly purposeful but possess imports that are always dubious" (Agu & Okeke, 2012: 81). Besides sedimentary policies, there may also be sedimentary concepts and their associated discontents from which the foregoing elucidations have attempted to disassociate cultural political economy.

5. Conclusion

It has been demonstrated in this contribution that the generic concept of political economy remains an attractive area of engagement in social scientific investigations. Among its manifold nuances is the notion of cultural political economy which invariably possesses some rocket-science-like theorization-tendencies and apparent discontents. The paper has accordingly attempted to contribute to the necessary elucidations towards the understanding of cultural political economy (CPE) as a worthwhile paradigm of social scientific engagement. Our data analyses lead to the conclusion that despite scholarly tendencies to the contrary, meaning-making in cultural political economy cannot be validly divorced from cultural relativism.

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