
As Paul du Gay wrote in 1997, the expression “cultural economy”—the title of this collection of essays he published with Michael Pryke—is conceived in order to strike imagination. Indeed, traditionally the relationship between these two terms was understood in a dichotomic way, distributed on each side of a broad chasm, culture and economics face each other in a distinguishing way. The essays assembled in this book are rather marked by an opposed guiding line, tending not simply to bring closer these two solitudes, but to inextricably link them together.

The first essay, written by the editors, introduces the concept of “cultural economy.” Two ways of seeing the articulation between these terms are discussed and guide this book’s general organization. One of them starts from the acknowledgment that economic discourses have some influence on the economy itself. The editors thus underline the performative character of all discourses on economy. According to them, the economy is a culturally built concept, a representation installed through heterogeneous elements, practices, and different technologies. For them, to recognize this premise allows us to break the barrier between culture and economy and to pass to “cultural economy”: “Doing economics means acting on the assumption of a determinate nature waiting to be described and calculated about by a neutral observation language; doing ‘cultural economy’ means acting on the assumption that economics are performed and enacted by the very discourses of which they are supposedly the cause” (p. 6).

This way of seeing cultural economy colours three essays throughout this book that emphasize the cultural construction of certain tools and economic knowledge. John Law’s chapter is particularly representative of this group. Drawing on the sociology of translation associated with l’École des mines de Paris (Callon, 1986; Latour, 2001), he proposes an analysis that focuses on the participation of some non-human—here a data-processing spreadsheet—in the installation of calculations, strategies, and “economic” subjectivities. Other essays—for example, Nigel Thrift’s—focus on the way in which this vision of the economy as a culturally built representation allows for a new exploration of supposed transformations in the economic field. Those transformations are revised in order not to conceive of them as the product of only political economic internal factors, but rather as historically performed through discourses and localized practices.

In their introduction, the editors propose a second way to articulate culture and economy. They start from the common assumption that states that the economy is becoming more cultural than it ever has been. This point emphasizes the supposed acceleration of the production of “artistic” or “cultural” goods, as compared to the past. More and more, the products of industry would be intangible, significations—“cultural.” The editors are not in accord with this assertion: according to them, the only acceleration of the culture/economy relationship would be at the level of the interests that managers manifest for the “organizational culture.” In fact, they plead for an examination of the discourses that present organizations as more “culturalized” entities.

The hypothesis of a “more cultural” economy is explored in this book mainly through five essays. Some of them propose a reflexion focused on the idea of organisational culture. For example, Angela McRobbie considers the valorization in England of “creative” organizations as a model for all other companies. She explores the discursive construction of their representation as “successes,” populated by young people and talented contractors, and by politicians and researchers in the economy. Three other essays offer a discussion based on the Bourdieusian idea that certain actors have as their task to attach signification to the product of economy: the cultural intermediaries. As Keith Negus describes in his chapter, cultural intermediaries are “those occupational groupings providing ‘symbolic
goods and services’, occupying a position between the producer and consumer (or artist and audience) and operating across and exerting influence within a nexus of social relationships” (p. 119). For example, Negus describes some of the British music industry staff practices in their evaluation of a musical product. Trying to get away from the vision of culture as a “corrupted victim” of economic logic, he shows that the displacement of the interest toward the “culture of production” instead of the production of culture makes it possible to understand how cultural products are conceived.

This book succeeds in inspiring us to rethink the relationship between culture and the economy. Eight years ago, Paul du Gay (1997) called into question dominant positions about this relationship, proposing two ways of articulating the terms together: to emphasize the idea of “production of culture” in order to mark the acceleration of the production of “culturally increased” goods, and to focus on the idea of “cultures of production” to underline an interest in the significant practices of actors participating in organizational context. Recalling the two sections of the book, these ways of articulating culture and production underline this displacement. In the first case—production of culture—the culture is seen as the product of economy: a disc, a film, an advertisement, et cetera. Having its own and circumscribed existence, culture is seen as influenced and guided by economy. The displacement proposed in this book toward the “cultures of production” sets up a vision focused on the installation processes of the economic practices: this includes practices associated with the organizational culture, and the production of knowledge on this economy (for instance, market research), et cetera. According to du Gay and Pryke, economy is a conjectural and culturally built idea. Thus, the question directing this book is not “how economy makes culture” but rather “how economy is cultural.”

The expression “cultural economy” makes it possible to get away from a vision of economy as an objective reality that we can observe “from the outside.” As du Gay has argued, “[B]efore one can even seek to manage something called an ‘economy’, it is first necessary to conceptualize or represent a set of processes and relations as an ‘economy’ which is amenable to management” (1997, p. 4). The force of this book is to follow this direction: without refusing to accommodate the statute of “reality,” this proposal underlines that it cannot be understood, handled, or analyzed without a discursive construction representing it. Explored in this collection are discourses on the economy by gurus of management, politicians, or researchers (McRobbie, Allen) and discourses “from the inside” of organizational culture by managers, workers, or objects (Negus, Law, Slater, Nixon).

The thesis of Cultural Economy is that culture and economy are not distinct. But some of the contributors seem to—at least partially—start from the Bourdieusian idea that culture and economy have some privileged points of contact. If culture and economy are not distinct, why focus on some actors rather than others who would regulate the articulation of two worlds? However, from this perspective, which seems somehow contradictory to the book’s thesis, the authors develop a reading of economy as a cultural, contingent construction to discourses and practices that inform it and emanate from it. Cultural Economy proposes a refreshing exploration of economy. The texts gathered in this book invite readers to reconsider their work in order not to use economy as an objective reality that is impermeable to external “contamination.” Opening a breach in the studies surrounding culture and economy, this book poses a provocative glance at discourses and practices in the economic field and calls into question the tendency to profess the arrival of a “new cultural turn.”

References


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