Cultural Studies and Political Economy: Toward a New Integration. 

In Cultural Studies and Political Economy: Toward a New Integration, Robert E. Babe focuses an interrogative lens on a scholarly rift between the fields of political economy and cultural studies. This academic breach not only stands in contrast to the material conditions of everyday life, in which the realms of culture, economy, and polity, continuously intertwine, but it also breaks with scholarly trajectory; during their respective developmental stages, political economy and cultural studies were, “fully integrated, consistent, and mutually supportive” (p. 4). Bonded by an investment in cultural materialism, the fields demonstrated, “mutual interaction and mutual dependency in the systems theory sense among culture, economy, and polity/policy” (p. 8). What then caused a scholarly divergence? In following Babe’s excavation of the division, one is confronted with a persuasive argument: it was the poststructuralist turn within cultural studies that instigated the bifurcation. An exploration of the rupture, including its causes, dimensions, consequences, and, possible resolutions (p. 4), is the focal point of the text, which Babe attends to with clarity and depth.

The work is organized in two parts: Part I—Genealogies (chapters one to four); and Part II—Portals for Dialogue (chapters five to eight). In chapter one, Babe traces the emergence of the scholarly discourse of critical political economy, and in chapter two, provides a genealogical analysis of the field of cultural studies. Cumulatively, these chapters supply an expansive audit of the critical approaches informing media and communication studies. Babe presents the reader with a superb overview of key individuals, schools, and texts, and elucidates the backdrop from which these works emerged, that is, the lived consequences, reminding the reader of the indispensable link between theory and practice.

Cementing the foundations of both political economy and cultural studies, Babe then shifts his attention in chapters three and four toward the circumstances that contributed to the poststructuralist turn. For Babe, the assertion that cultural studies and political economy were never coupled is false. The poststructuralist turn within cultural studies induced an internal rupture within cultural studies itself, between poststructuralism and cultural materialism. And this interior division created an illusion of exterior separation, between cultural studies (as a whole) and critical political economy. Therefore, political economy and cultural studies were never really divorced.

Positing the origins of the misinterpreted divide to a “Colloquy” published in the March 1995 issue of Critical Studies in Mass Communication, Babe explains:

As noted in the Introduction, the Colloquy of 1995 pitted cultural studies against political economy in a written debate involving four scholars. Nicholas Garnham and Lawrence Grossberg represented the poles of political economy-cultural studies spectrum, while Graham Murdock (political economy) and James Carey (cultural studies) assumed hostile but somewhat intermediary positions. (p. 97)
The participants in the colloquy became focused on delineating disciplinary boundaries and disparities (i.e., cultural studies vs. political economy, or “us versus them”). Such a focal point was a distraction from the more problematic issue—the split within cultural studies, between cultural materialism and post-structuralism. “The renowned split,” reflects Babe, “has been, in a sense, a distraction, a diversion, a faux debate” (p. 195). In allowing the real problem to remain unidentified, political and ideological differences, or what Babe also refers to as differences in the political economy of scholarship, continued to widen the gap between poststructuralists and cultural materialists, yet the gap was widely claimed as dissolution between political economy and cultural studies.

Despite a forceful critique of poststructuralism, Babe is not dismissive of it. The tone of the second portion of the text is one of restoration. In Part II – Portals for Dialogue, Babe emphasizes the necessity of a retrieval, cultivation, and maintenance of a dialectical middle ground between cultural studies and political economy (p. 5). And to demonstrate the potential of such a venture, Babe engages with what he views as three intersections between political economy and cultural studies: 1) the cultural biases of money; 2) the time/space dialectic; and, 3) the dialectic of information. In effect, the author is demanding for a deliberate (re)immersion of cultural materialism, and across cultural, economic, and political domains.

Finally, an acknowledgment of the origins of the work is necessary, I think, because it situates the specific context, that is, Canadian cultural studies, from which the work emerged. Addressing the issue, Babe writes:

It was in the spirit of reconciliation between cultural studies and political economy that in the fall of 2002 Professor Jody Berland invited me to prepare annual political economy columns for Topia: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies, with a view also to stimulating policy-and political economy-related submissions. (p. 9)

Accepting Berland’s invitation, Babe authored five columns from the spring of 2003 to the fall of 2006, and the revised versions of those publications constitute chapters four to eight. This specification of origins underscores the dialogic dimensions between political economy and cultural studies in general, but also, the progressiveness of a Canadian academic milieu that encourages and nurtures such an interchange between seemingly disparate disciplines.

Note

1. For Babe, cultural studies is loosely defined as “the multidisciplinary study of culture across various social strata, where culture refers to arts, knowledge, beliefs, customs, practices, and norms of social interaction.” Comparably, the author establishes studies in the political economy of media as focusing on, “the economic, financial, and political causes and consequences of culture” (2009, p. 4).

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