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Rethinking “culture”: A cultural-materialist account of social space

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Abstract: Studies in sociology and political economy typically depend on a shared, problematic vision of social space; what I call the “separate spheres” model, which divides social space into discrete, quasi-geographical bounded domains labelled “culture”, “economy”, “politics” and so on. Where this “separate spheres” model underpins and informs theoretical or empirical work, it creates various analytical difficulties, including, historically, the treatment of culture as the derivative “effect” of other spheres. The recently emergent field of cultural economy attempts to remedy this deficiency in various ways, and while it succeeds in revaluing culture as a causal force itself, it fails to fully resolve the difficulties associated with the underlying map of social space. In this paper, I put forward a cultural-materialist map of social space, which, drawing on and developing the work of Raymond Williams and Pierre Bourdieu, refuses this demarcation of social space into discrete bounded “spheres”, and offers a means of conceptualizing the causal power of the cultural without succumbing to idealism. Remaining resolutely attentive to the sociality and materiality of the world, this approach reaffirms the importance of the earlier “cultural studies” of Williams and Bourdieu to the new paradigm of cultural economy.

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Concepts like “culture” and “economy” form part of a general vocabulary that people make common use of in order to understand the processes, practices and social relations which shape their everyday lives. Yet, they are also contentious categories, as many political, financial and personal decisions are made on the basis of defining a particular activity or value as “cultural” or “economic” in the first place. Despite this, there is a widespread assumption that everyone knows what “culture” or “economy” means. This paper brings conceptual clarity to these issues, by distinguishing between “culture” and “economy”, and offering a way of thinking about how these two key domains of social life may be interrelated.

1. Introduction

The last 20 years or so has seen the emergence of the field of cultural economy, jostling for disciplinary space in sociology and cultural studies departments, but most closely associated with the field of human geography. Cultural economy is notable for its rethinking of some of the foundational questions of political economy, particularly the relationship of capitalism to the society of which it forms a part, in a way which puts the domain of culture firmly on the agenda. In particular, cultural economy has challenged the division of the social world into mutually exclusive “spheres” of culture and economy, and has argued instead for recognition of their deep imbrication. This orientation has given rise to a number of interesting new research agendas, including the changing nature or “culturalization” of the economy, the development of the “creative industries” and the cultural constitution of the city (Harvey, 1989; Scott, 2000; Zukin, 1995). In these projects, cultural economy understands itself to represent an advance on political economy in its reconceptualization of culture as a causal force in its own right, and not merely derivative of or produced by other (especially economic) relations and structures.

A number of key articles have recently been written in the field of cultural economy, reflecting on its emergence, reviewing key trends in its consolidation and suggesting future research agendas that might draw fruitfully upon disparate strands in the field, or fill certain perceived lacunae (Castree, 2004; Gibson, 2012; Gibson & Kong, 2005; Ribera-Fumaz, 2009). Useful though this recent spate of self-reflection, mapping and setting of new research agendas has been, I do not want to engage directly with this conversation here. Instead, I want to return to that original impetus of cultural economy on the grounds that I believe that the question of the relation of culture to economy has never been satisfactorily resolved, and that the arguments for future research agendas depend upon this prior conceptualization of social space at its heart. While endorsing the general orientation of cultural economy towards a flat ontology, its suspicion of hard divisions of the social world into reified spaces, and its revaluation of culture as a causal force, I believe that cultural economy has been overly influenced by a poststructuralist orientation, and is insufficiently materialist, with serious consequences for its underlying—indeed, foundational—map of social space.

In what follows, I will present an overview and critique of the “separate spheres” model of social space, and then set out in more detail the ways in which the field of cultural economy has engaged with, utilized, challenged or transcended this model. I argue that earlier work in cultural studies and “the sociology of culture”, in particular that of Raymond Williams and Pierre Bourdieu, presents as an underused resource in this context, and offers the capacity to provide a map of social space which would enhance the theoretical basis of cultural economy, and provide for a clearer working out of its research agendas. On this basis, I use and develop Williams’ “cultural-materialist” paradigm to construct a conceptual model of social space that offers an alternative to those characterizing both traditional studies in sociology and political economy, and newer approaches in cultural economy.

2. The “separate spheres” model of social space

Many studies in sociology and political economy depend upon a relatively commonplace sociological vision of social space which is, I claim here, ultimately problematic. I refer to this as the “separate spheres” model, because it divides the whole social space into discrete, bounded domains, labelled “culture”, “economy”, “politics” and so on, each of which “contains” practices, institutions and material things of the supposed corresponding character. Where this “separate spheres” model underpins and informs theoretical or empirical work in political economy or sociology, it gives rise to various analytical difficulties. For example, where political economic or sociological studies are concerned to address the relationship between economic institutions, such as corporate production, on the one hand, and non-economic institutions, such as changing patterns of consumption, family roles or political structures on the other, the underlying separate spheres model tends to require the assignment of each institution to a different bounded sphere, and the exploration of exogenous relations between the two. Analysis often proceeds in a way which fails to appreciate (or, which does not have the analytical and conceptual capacity to account for) the interrelatedness and overlapping

nature of many of the practices and processes assigned in a reificatory manner to different zones. Thus, while education plays a key role in training workers for the labour market, it is typically conceptualized as a separate sphere, distinct from the economy. Similarly, the legal system is imagined to comprise legal institutions, practices and forms of legislation, yet all of these practices are deeply implicated in the constitution of other “spheres”, including the very conceptualization of the family, and indeed, the management of the “free” markets and private property rights considered part of “the economy”.

To take another example, where sociological or political economic studies are concerned to analyse the relationship between capitalism and the society of which it forms a part—which has been a constitutive concern of both political economy and sociology—this model forces us into a (false) choice between viewing capitalism as “in” the economy, and then exploring its exogenous relations to “culture”, “politics” and so forth; or viewing capitalism as somehow equivalent to the whole social space (“the capitalist society”), and then exploring the endogenous relationships within that capitalist space between the already capitalist economic, cultural or political “spheres” (Chitty, 1997). There are clearly difficulties with both approaches. The model which allocates capitalism entirely to the economic sphere causes analytical problems for those who recognize capitalism to be made up of religious, moral, cultural, social and political, and not only economic, practices. The de facto separation of, for example, liberal democracy, “individualism”, or the modern legal system from the capitalist system is viewed as problematic, since the viability and existence of the whole system is recognized to depend upon the legal protections, political institutions and cultural values which sustain it. Meanwhile, the alternative formulation which views capitalism more expansively as a particular kind of society tends in practice towards economic reductionism, by seeing the economy as the key determinant of all other cultural, social and political formations. This in turn causes analytical problems for those who recognize cultural and political institutions and practices—for example, “individualism” or modern legal systems—to have pre-dated and to have developed at least in part in autonomously from the capitalist system. Marxism and subsequent Marxisms provide the paradigm example of this model, and the proffered notion of “relative autonomy” as a means of resolving the attendant economic determinism has demonstrably proved unsatisfactory.

In summary, the separate spheres model is thus problematic for its separation of particular sets of institutions, practices and entities into mutually exclusive and quasi-geographical spaces, which prompts us to view each of these “spheres” as concrete categories in themselves, conceptually prior to the social actions and relations that make them up. This also gives the impression that the practices and institutions making up these different “spheres” are distinct and separate from each other when in fact they are often intertwined and co-constitutive. Finally, such “separate spheres” conceptualization creates a tendency to engage in a somewhat peculiar abstract analysis of the relations between the different “spheres” as things-in-themselves, instead of examination of the different activities, institutions and belief systems that we understand to comprise them. Rather than begin from an investigation of the nature and social impact of dominant practices or institutions, which may be cultural, economic and political at the same time and in different ways, analysis is forced instead to look for the causal priority of one “sphere” over another.

3. Cultural economy and the challenge to “separate spheres”

In recent years, cultural economy has emerged to offer a direct and serious challenge to the “separate spheres” model of social space, though as name suggests, this field focuses almost entirely on the twin categories of culture and economy, to the exclusion of politics and society. In recognition of the intertwined nature of many practices construed as “economy” or “culture” and assigned to exclusive zones on that basis, cultural geographers leading the debate such as Amin and Thrift (2003, 2007), Castree (2004), and Du Gay and Pryke (2002), have argued that we cease to separate “culture” from “economy” and think instead of “the cultural economy”, “an entangled entity” that “has to be seen as an act of many goals, from meeting material needs and making a profit or earning a living, through seeking symbolic satisfaction, pleasure and power” (Amin & Thrift, 2007, p. 145). Critical of other economic or sociological attempts to capture relations between

culture and economy, Amin and Thrift argue they fail to fully recognize “all institutions—from habits and routines and norms and rules, to firms and organisations—as more or less hard-edged cultural artifacts; all the product of cultural practice, negotiation, settlement and legitimation” (ibid., p. 144). On this basis, they claim that “economic life is so shot through with cultural inputs and practices at all levels that ‘culture’ and ‘economy’ cannot be seen as separate entities” at all (ibid., p. 143). Their preferred approach thus “rethinks the economy as cultural achievement and culture as an economic impulse” (Amin & Thrift, 2007, p. 150).

Although such theorists claim that cultural formations are also “economic”, in fact, the weight of their argument rests with the claim that those things, practices and institutions that we have demarcated as economic are actually cultural, in the sense of being meaningful and discursive. This, of course, can hardly be denied. However, in these accounts, the insistence upon the meaningful, semiotic and discursive nature of all economic practices leads ultimately to the collapse of the category of the economic entirely into the cultural. For while they contend that the economic is cultural, it is much harder to see in their argument or studies how the cultural is, in any similar sense, always and in every instance, economic. After all, for Amin and Thrift, the economy is a “cultural achievement”, while culture is only “an economic impulse”—whatever *that* means. Similarly, it is “economic life” that is “so shot through” with cultural inputs, and not cultural life that is somehow shot through with economic inputs. The same orientation can be found in du Gay and Pryke’s work, as they emphasize that “doing cultural economy” means attention to “economics as culture” (2002, p. 6)—but not, it seems, “culture as economics”. Despite claims, then, of “the inseparability of culture and economy” (Amin & Thrift, 2007, p. 157), it is clear that it is the cultural which has expanded to engulf the economic, rather than vice versa. This is a seriously reductive move, with relativistic implications, leaving us unable to account for the power of “the economy” outside this supposed discursive centrality. Even where the economy is understood to have causal power, this is not the economy as we know it, but rather, *economic discourse*. Since the distinction between culture and economy is imagined to exist only on discursive grounds (Castree, 2004), the only intelligible task we could set ourselves is to attempt to understand how some elements of discourse affect others.

This argument that economic practices have a meaningful and semiotic quality, and are therefore “cultural”, is a version of a more general set of currently popular claims about the constitutive centrality of culture and discourse to social life, which is connected to “the cultural turn” in the social sciences. The key argument here is that language, ideas and beliefs—routinely, “discourse”—systematically *create* the modes of being, forms of action and even objects they seem to presuppose or describe. As Torfing (1999, p. 300) specifies, “discourse ... does not merely designate a linguistic region within the social, but is rather co-extensive with the social”. Boucher (2008, p. 16) argues that the effect of this is that many of these theorists work within what he calls the “charmed circle of ideology”, which he uses to refer to “postmarxism’s tendency to reduce politics and economics to ideological struggles”. Thus, from this perspective—and based on the expansive definition of culture at its heart—*everything* is cultural. To continue with the example given earlier, if this general post-structuralist or post-Marxist perspective is applied to understand the relationship of capitalism to the society of which it forms a part, we end up with an overly culturalist, and ultimately idealist, model: capitalism is a set of discursive practices within the bigger discursive space that is the social.

This problem has been identified in the spate of self-reflection that currently characterizes the field of cultural economy. For example, Hinde and Dixon (2007, p. 412–3) have argued that Amin and Thrift, and du Gay and Pryke are overly culturalist, and that despite “a firm rhetorical emphasis on culture and economy as equally important counterparts in an intertwined system, there is a curious privileging of one feature: namely, the increased/increasing ‘culturalization’ of the economy”. Citing others writing in a similarly critical vein, Hinde and Dixon argue that

cultural economy ought also to concern itself with the cultural impacts of economic power, economic structures, commodity and labour markets and consumption practices. The economic sphere's influence over modern culture is missing from much that is being written under the cultural economy umbrella (ibid., p. 408).

They suggest that as well as focusing on the cultural processes that help “generate” or “perform” the economic, cultural economists should also look at the ways in which “cultural systems are being assembled by economic actors and processes whether to aid the economic performance or ... as an unintended by-product of it” (ibid., p. 409). Hinde and Dixon's intervention is a valuable one—and in fact, the main work of their paper is to draw, as I will shortly, upon the work of Bourdieu to remedy some of the perceived deficiencies of cultural economy. However, their general call to remedy the culturalist bias of cultural economy with an emphasis on the determining nature of the economic is, I believe, problematic within this field. Firstly, it looks quite similar to the “economic determinism” Thrift, du Gay and others are deliberately trying to transcend in their rendition of “cultural economy”. Were they to follow Hinde and Dixon's advice to look at the “structuring nature of economics ... upon culture” (ibid., p. 413), it is hard to see how this would differentiate their work from the types of political economy they have been actively trying to move beyond. Secondly, while greater attention to the impact of economic processes on the cultural is to be welcomed—from my perspective at least, if not from that of Thrift and du Gay—I do not believe that this intervention gets to the heart of problem with cultural economy as it has evolved. That is, I believe that in countering the perceived excessive culturalism of cultural economy with an equal dose of economism, Hinde and Dixon are misconstruing the nature of the problem. The problem has not primarily to do with the focus of the research (that is, with an over emphasis on cultural processes in the economy, at the expense of equal attention to economic processes in culture), but with its epistemological foundations and assumptions, specifically as this relates to its underlying map of social space.

Coming closer to the nub of the problem, Gibson (2012) and Gibson and Kong (2005) have focused on the multivalency of the term “cultural economy”, pointing out that it has been used to refer to both a specific sector of the economy comprised of the “cultural industries” and “creative industries”, and to a specific “epistemological agenda”, which is “to destabilize the presumed separateness of ‘culture’ and ‘economy’ as categories” (Gibson, 2012, p. 282). The problem here is that the epistemological project of unsettling culture and economy as categories makes it very hard to place limits on what should be included in “the” cultural economy itself. Gibson and Kong recognize this problem when they write that “[i]f symbolic content is taken as a starting point, then a much wider range of activities could be included [in the cultural economy]” (2005, p. 543). Indeed, it is hard to see how anything could be excluded. However, they do not follow this line of argument to its logical conclusion, and rather than push for a clearer distinction between the epistemological and substantive agenda of cultural economy, they “resist [the] urge” to “assert our perspective on what ‘cultural economy’ should mean, or how research in this area should be conducted”, and instead move to “reaffirm the multivalency of cultural economy” (2012, pp. 556–7). A specific example of this occurs where they observe that “a common imperative has often been to make generalizations about the cultural economy, as a transformative component of total economic activities in places, such that it can be considered as a whole-of-economy phenomenon” (ibid., p. 549), but fail to make the connection between their earlier acknowledgement of the expansive tendencies of this redefinition of culture as anything with “symbolic content”, and this reconstitution of the whole economy as the cultural economy. The key here is to recognize what Gibson and Kong do not quite say, which is that symbolic content exists in *all* fields, but that this in themselves does not make them “cultural”. The fact that “the economy”, as we know it, has symbolic content, does not mean that we should view the whole economy as the cultural economy. At stake here once again is the dual use of the word culture to refer to a either a specific social site, or to anything with symbolic content. The problem, as I have been arguing, comes when both uses are run together or, at least, inadequately distinguished.

To return to the original claims of cultural economy, then, the case I want to make here is that the valid argument that economic practices are value-laden, embedded in cultural practices and construed discursively, does not entail that we cannot distinguish between “culture” and “economy”. As Ray and Sayer (1999, p. 4) point out, people have good reason to expect something different when they take up a course in cultural studies as opposed to economics, and this expectation reflects something significant and real about actually existing differences between “culture” and “economy”. Although the radical suspicion of cultural economists towards what I have been calling the separate spheres model is warranted, I argue that in breaking these boundaries, these theorists in effect fail to maintain what is an important distinction between the substantive and the ontological. Specifically, they elide the substantive category of “culture”—roughly, “pastime, tradition, pop culture, forms of expression in art and new media” (Gibson, 2012, p. 283) with the ontological category of the ideal—roughly, the meaningful and symbolic dimension of life—collapsing both into a single category, “culture”. It is my contention that if the concept of culture is to have any analytic purchase, and if we want to avoid an idealizing orientation, these two uses of “culture” must be distinguished.

I want to suggest now that Raymond Williams’s cultural-materialist approach—reconstructed—provides an alternative to both the separate spheres and the poststructuralist cultural economy models outlined here, and ultimately opens the way for more useful forms of interdimensional analysis. Although Williams also took issue with the separation of domains of thought and action into separate spheres, and argued that there could be no clear separation of the cultural and the economic, his cultural-materialist approach nonetheless maintains the necessary distinction between the cultural and the ideal, and in so doing, paves the way for a more useful conceptualization of social space than is otherwise offered. While cultural materialism arises out of a radical rethinking of the concept of culture, this rethinking, as I will show, also has implications for categories other than the cultural, including significantly “economy” and “politics”, though this is not as explicitly articulated in his work. I will now sketch out a cultural-materialist account of social space that is reconstructed in large part from Williams’s own writings, but also supplemented with my own extrapolation from what I understand to be the key principles of cultural materialism. I also draw on “field theory”, and in particular, the work of Pierre Bourdieu, as his work is compatible with, and can help flesh out in more depth, the cultural-materialist map of social space that I will here outline.

4. A cultural-materialist ontology: Rethinking the category of culture

Perhaps the greatest contribution of cultural materialism is the provocative insistence that “culture is material”. Against the idealization of culture, Williams consistently emphasized the materiality and productiveness of cultural forms. The cultural is not, according to Williams, a set of “isolable” meanings, “occupying merely the top of our minds”, superficial, detachable from the reality. Instead, it is part of, and helps to constitute, reality: culture is, in his memorable phrase, “built into our living” (1973, p. 9). Williams did not reserve his critique for those theories of an idealist orientation which saw culture as an ideational realm of values, aesthetics and intellect, dissociated from the mundane and earthly world of things, but also directed it at “...the naïve dualism of ‘mechanical materialism’, in which the idealist separation of ‘ideas’ and ‘material reality’ had been repeated, but with its priorities reversed” (Williams, 1977, p. 59). That is, while Williams welcomed the Marxist rejection of the “idealist historiography”, and the attendant materialist supplication that we must analyse ideas and values in the social conditions of their production, believing it would open up potentially very fruitful avenues of analysis and “discovery of new constitutive relationships between ‘society’ and ‘economy’”, he was deeply critical of the subsequent development of this materialist orientation within Marxism (ibid., p. 18–19). “Instead of making cultural history material, which was the next radical move”, he complained,

it was made dependent, secondary, “superstructural”: a realm of “mere” ideas, beliefs, arts, customs, determined by the basic material history. What matters here is not only the element of reduction; it is the reproduction, in an altered form, of the separation of “culture” from material social life, which had been the dominant tendency in idealist cultural thought.

So while Williams' approach remains materialist in orientation, it reorders and arguably strengthens orthodox or Marxist materialism "in its insistence that 'cultural practice' and 'cultural production'... are not simply derived from an otherwise constituted social order but are themselves major elements in its constitution" (Williams, 1981, p. 12). Rather than simply account for culture within a materialist paradigm, Williams sought to *materialize culture*, and to insist upon "the full possibilities of the concept of culture as a constitutive social process, creating specific and different 'ways of life'" (1977, p. 19).

But this emphasis on the materiality of culture did not mean that Williams did not think that culture did not also have an ideal quality. In fact, against definitions of culture as either ideal or material (most commonly captured in oppositions of anthropological to aesthetic accounts of culture), Williams insisted that a proper account of culture must always recognize culture as both. The notion that material and symbolic production "have always to be related rather than contrasted", specifically so in terms of the category of culture, is a defining contention of Williams's cultural materialism (1983, p. 91). In fact, I suggest that this is what distinguishes Williams's work most clearly from historical materialism, as it is revealed it to rest upon a different (albeit emergent and not wholly articulated) ontology. The world cannot be divided into material and ideal realms, but the material and ideal are combined in every instance of social (as opposed to natural) life. "Consciousness is seen from the beginning as part of the human material social process, and its products in 'ideas' are then as much part of this process as material products themselves", Williams writes (1977, pp. 59–60). In setting out this case, I believe that Williams makes a very significant move. I suggest that what he does is rework the Marxist and materialist premise that ideas arise from and reflect the material conditions and circumstances in which they are generated, and replace it with what we may call the "cultural-materialist premise" (McGuigan & Moran, 2014; Moran, 2014). This does not challenge the proposition that material forces drive history, but instead reconsiders that which may legitimately be considered a material force, by crucially considering "culture" as itself material, and thus also a driver of social change. Hence, *cultural materialism*.

All of this, however, is worked out in reference to our understanding of "culture", as Williams continues to package this alternative ontological orientation which refuses any practical distinction between the material and the ideal primarily in terms of the concept of culture. Though he refuses to ultimately define "culture", on the grounds that this reduces the true complexity and wealth of meaning of the term, I believe it is possible to distil his large volume of writings and ruminations on the subject in order to arrive at a working definition of "culture" as those creative meaning-making activities, both in everyday life and the arts, which animate a whole way of life—or, in shorthand, what he once referred to as "a realized signifying system" (Williams, 1981, p. 207). But there are contradictions and problems here which must be resolved if this cultural-materialist orientation is to be of real analytical value. Although Williams continues, implicitly and otherwise, to refer to culture as a particular social space throughout his work, it is clear that he does not see cultural processes as confined to anything that could approximate a "cultural sphere". So, for example, though not as clearly emphasized, it is clear that Williams (1973) sees "cultural" processes at play in the economy, and, relatedly, in what is referred to as the base in Marxist theory. Moreover, as I have shown, Williams repeatedly refers to culture as a constitutive social process—and therefore as working throughout the *whole* social space. Culture, as Williams understands it, cannot therefore be seen as a discrete "part" of the social order, but instead must be understood as constitutive of it. Now, *this* seems to come uncomfortably close to the idealist poststructural position associated with cultural economy that I have rejected, because it appears to equate the whole of the social with the cultural. This is where we must intervene, therefore, since if the whole social space is "cultural" in the sense Williams intends it, then we cannot also continue to use that word to refer to a *particular* space, or a particular set of practices and institutions within that society. To do so is to conflate a typological and substantive way of organizing social space with a particular perspective on how that social space is ontologically constituted; and it is to invite the kind of idealist mistake made by those who claim that "the whole world is cultural". Thus, we see that there is a liminal contradiction in Williams's work between his reference to culture as a particular social space, and his cultural-materialist

orientation which views the ideal and the material as inseparable in the category of culture, and as working through—indeed, constituting—the whole of the social. It is clear, therefore, that culture cannot usefully operate as a substantive and an ontological category, and if cultural materialism is to be of analytical value, we must find an alternative way of managing this distinction.

5. Towards a cultural-materialist account of social space

The important question now becomes, since we cannot retain culture as a substantive *and* ontological category at the same time, which use—if either—should we retain? And how specifically can this overarching cultural-materialist orientation that I have set out, including its reworking of the category of culture, help resolve the problem and allow for a better conceptualization of social space more generally, including those other categories of “economy” and “politics”?

Working against the grain of Williams’s more expansive accounts of “culture”, I suggest we do not use the word culture, or adjective “cultural”, to refer to the inseparability of ideas and values from their material and practical embodiment, or more formally, the symbiosis of the ideal and the material across the whole of social space. This is better understood as an overarching ontological orientation, represented by the term “cultural materialism”, as outlined. If we want to make the case that the economic is value-laden, meaningful and discursive, where all of these values, meanings and discourses are themselves materialized and animated in practice, then we should just *make* that case—but we do not need to package this understanding as “culture”, nor, on that basis, make the misleading and unhelpful claim that the economic is therefore “cultural”. This strategy allows us to avoid the problem of those idealist accounts which, by correctly recognizing the meaningful and discursive nature of all practices, but failing to properly separate the meaningful and discursive from the substantive category of “culture”, arrive at an expansive concept of the cultural as coterminous with the whole of the social.

This entails a shrinkage of the category of the cultural again, away from that expansive ontological sense, back to its use in a narrower, more confined and substantive sense. Specifically, I suggest that we conceive of culture—and indeed, the other categories of “economy”, politics’ and so forth—as sets of actions, ideas and entities of a particular kind or character. Thus—and I will elaborate on this shortly, including on the potentially tautological nature of this claim—I believe we should deploy the word culture, and adjective cultural, to refer to those thoughts, actions, things and institutions that are *characteristically* and primarily “cultural”, that is, to do with social meanings, identities, narratives, beliefs, ideologies, stories, values and so on. Given all I have just said, however, I am not here arguing for a return to that “separate spheres” conceptualization, where “culture” exists as a discrete-bounded space in society, nor as a concrete entity “containing” things of a cultural nature. Instead, what I am arguing is that we retain the notion of culture as a substantive category, but crucially, one that is made up of the practices and processes which constitute it.

These moves—(i) the separation of the category of culture from the ontological orientation that refuses to distinguish between the ideal and the material in its account of the constitution of social space, and (ii) the reduction of the category of the culture to a substantive category that is not space bound but made up of practices and processes of a particular character—have consequences for our cultural-materialist mapping of the social space, including the categories of economy and politics and so forth which are perceived to make it up. Firstly, we can say that these categories, too, as much as social space more broadly, must be understood as meaningful and material at the same time: there can be no division of this social space, or designation of particular categories, as exclusively ideal or material. This ontological vision is therefore compatible with what Amin and Thrift (2007, p. 146) identify as “the orientation of the cultural-economy approach towards a flat (yet profoundly variegated and uneven) ontology”, but as I will show, provides a more robust and useful map of social space in the process. In what sense, then, is the cultural-materialist map of social space I am setting out here variegated? It is not variegated by blocks of “ideal” spaces, and then “blocks” of material space. Nor, as I have said, can it be divided into the separate spheres of culture and economy. Instead I want to suggest—and the second consequence of the cultural-materialist

reworking of culture is—that social space is variegated by different sets of practices, ideas, things and institutions of a particular kind, which are socially recognizable as of a particular kind, and construed as particular and discrete social categories on that basis—i.e. what we refer to as economy, politics, culture and so on.

Although not expressly articulating a cultural-materialist map of social space, Williams sets out and clarifies such a vision of social space by arguing that rather than reify thought and action into concrete spaces, we should begin analytically from an examination of the practices and processes which themselves actively create the categories which seem to contain them. He points out that that the treatment of base and superstructure—and analogously, culture and economy—as “separate concrete entities” leads “orthodox analysts” to lose sight of “the very processes—not abstract relations but constitutive processes—which it should have been the special function of historical materialism to emphasize” (Williams, 1977, p. 81).¹ Their key move here is not the relinquishment of social categories but a rethinking of their constitution: certain practices and institutions are not “in” or preceded by the category of culture or politics, say, but the existence and perpetuation of a set of interconnected practices and processes of a particular character create these categories themselves. Thus, a cultural-materialist account of social space does not begin by separating practices and processes into discrete social spaces, but instead looks directly at the often intertwined and co-constitutive practices that animate the social landscape. But recognition of the intertwined nature of many of the processes usually assigned to “culture” and “economy”—or indeed, the refusal to reify these spaces—does not mean we must abandon culture and economy as distinct social categories (as Amin and Thrift argue we must); after all, these are functional heuristic categories that cannot be done without. Instead, we should recognize these categories as historical and social rather than universal and naturally existing entities. Indeed as Williams points out, the demarcation of particular activities, institutions, systems and so forth into separate “spheres”, perhaps most especially those known to us as “economy”, “culture” and “society”, is historically recent and socially active process itself. He writes:

Society, economy, culture: each of these “areas”, now tagged by a concept, is a comparatively recent historical formulation. “Society” was active fellowship, company, “common doing”, before it became the description of a general system or order. “Economy” was the management of a household and then the management of a community before it became the description of a perceived system of production, distribution and exchange. “Culture”, before these transitions, was the growth and tending of crops and animals, and by extension, was the growth and tending of human faculties (1977, p. 11).

This is not to suggest that because they are socially constructed as historically specific categories that they are simply or primarily discursive formations, as is suggested in other variants of cultural economy. Instead, consideration of each “sphere” in cultural-materialist terms demonstrates that their emergence as categories indicates and is bound up with the substantive material importance of the actions, ideas, institutions and behaviours that have come to be framed in terms of these categories. Emphasis on the social and historical constitution of culture, economy and society as categories enables us to see that the very separation of different practices into different spheres is not natural or universal but in fact political (in the sense of power-laden), and often works in the service of some dominant set of interests. For example, within capitalist-patriarchal societies, the “political sphere” is understood as separate from both the domestic sphere and the economic sphere, with domestic institutions depoliticising issues by personalizing or familiarizing them, and with economic discourses and practices depoliticizing matters by casting them as subject to the indifferent logic of the market. This does not simply show the interpenetration of “spheres”, but the active interests served by their construal as separate—and, in this case, the interests of those served by patriarchal capitalism. Thus, we see that the evolution of “separate spheres” is as much a product of the deliberate construal and protection of certain activities as distinct from others as of any “natural” development and consolidation of certain types of practice. Following Williams, then,

rather than reify spheres as either space-bound categories or concrete entities, it is more useful to recognize “culture” and “economy” and indeed “politics” and “society” as historical and heuristic categories which themselves shape and order the processes carried out in their name.

Recent work by Mitchell (2002, 2008) and Buck-Morss (1995) on the construction of the very category of “the economy” lends further weight to this analysis. Mitchell shows how the very notion of the economy is itself a recent one, emerging into popular and scientific discourse only in the 1930s. But unlike the poststructural cultural economists I have been critiquing, and demonstrating in his work what I would characterize a cultural-materialist orientation (though he does not cite Williams), he argues emphatically that this does not mean that “the economy was a ‘cultural construction’ of the twentieth century” (2002, p. 82). Rather, he claims, “the economy was *made*”, and “was made out of processes that were as much ‘material’ as they were ‘cultural’, and that were as ‘real’ as they were ‘abstract’” (ibid., emphasis in original). He goes on to uncover and trace the way in which the economy came into being, “as a self-contained, internally dynamic, and statistically measurable sphere of social action, scientific analysis, and political regulation” (ibid., p. 4). And importantly for the argument I am developing here, he claims that a consequence of this was that “a variety of other spaces could now be conceived in terms of their relationship to this hermetic field: the sphere of politics or the state; the sphere of law...;the sphere of science and technology; and the sphere of culture” (ibid., p. 82). It should also be pointed out here that in his later paper, and representing an advance on the thinking presented in the 2005 paper with Kong, Gibson also demonstrates the value of this approach and argues—as I have—that the problem with cultural economy as it has evolved lies with some of its “original precepts”. He argues that cultural economy should “revisit deeper questions about how ‘the economic’ is constituted and ‘known’ in the first place” (2012, p. 284). He then uses the work of Mitchell in particular to argue that the economy should be viewed as a socio-technical practice, which he also distinguishes from the claim that “the economic is culturally constructed” (ibid., p. 285) by recognizing the material, practical and not merely discursive bases of such a project. It is interesting to note, however, that none of these theorists extend the same analytical treatment to the category of culture as I have done here. While this work is very important and useful—politically and analytically—on its own terms as it stands, without a similar interrogation of “culture”, it is not sufficient to fully resolve the problems I have identified with cultural economy.

6. Cultural materialism and field analysis

In order to distinguish this cultural-materialist map of social space from those I have characterized as the “separate spheres” models, I will use the term “field” to describe those categorical set of ideas, things and actions that we refer to as culture, economy and so on. In so doing, I will draw upon the already existing body of field theory, and in particular, the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Although I am not here concerned to challenge or advance field theory, I want to use some of Bourdieu’s ideas in order to elucidate further the cultural-materialist conception of social space, and also to mark some of ways in which it differs from Bourdieu’s conceptualization.

Bourdieu understood a “field” to be constituted by the practices and purposes that animate it, rather than to (pre-)exist them as a particular space. Against common understandings of the world as divided up into hard spaces, Bourdieu advanced a conceptualization of social space as analytically and practically divisible into different sites and sets of practices and rules, with recognizable (though disputable) boundaries, but which did not correspond in any sense to “real” hard spaces. Bourdieu saw fields as structured spaces, the architecture—and indeed, existence—of which derives from the distribution of some kind of capital, rather than from any physical location or institutional domain. On this basis, Bourdieu conceptualizes fields specifically as sites of struggle. Bourdieu’s conceptualization of fields as organized around struggles over capital is in line with and part of his overarching social theory of class and power, within which the concepts of habitus and homology are explanatorily significant.² In contrast to this, a field, as I have conceptualized it in line with cultural-materialist understandings, is characterized by consensus as much as struggle. In this respect, the cultural-materialist conception of a field that I outline here is closer to the

Mannheimian (1940) conception of a field as an organization of forces rather than a site of contestation. On his terms, a field is like a game, with shared rules, in which people may compete against or work with each other. Thus it is not necessary to accept Bourdieu's contention that fields are sites of struggle over capital in order to deploy the concept of a field analytically—and indeed, as Warde (2004) and Martin (2003) point out, there is no compelling reason to assume that fields are constituted solely by competitive and strategic forces. In the cultural-materialist terms of this argument, they are just as likely to be constituted by agreement over social values and aims, even though people may be positioned very differently to realize these aims, and though many of these aims themselves may have an ideological or distortive quality. This difference aside, the very concept of a field, both as Bourdieu and others construe it, is itself a relational one—as Bourdieu and Wacquant stress, “To think in terms of fields is to *think relationally*” (1992, p. 96, emphasis in original). An effect of this relational perspective is to recognize that the boundaries between fields cannot be sharply drawn, for as Swartz (1997, p. 122) points out, these “boundaries are themselves objects of struggle”—and, I would suggest, of powerful forms of consensus. Thus, the notion of fields builds into its conceptual apparatus the key point that the very definition of what constitutes “the economy” or “culture” in the first place is a power struggle, with certain interests being met by drawing the boundaries in particular ways. A further advantage of the field perspective, analytically, is that it “encourage[s] social scientists not to narrow prematurely the range of their investigation” (Swartz 1997, p. 121), as depending on the type of practices at stake, a field can be as extended and complex as the political field, or as specialized and contained as a particular artistic field. Although in some ways the notion of a field continues to connote physical space, the key point is that once the organizational force has done its work (or is *at work*), the struggles and practices it both animates and generates create the shape of a field in the process. But a field is not a sphere—and this type of analysis does not begin by dividing the world into zones but instead tracks the formations that arise out of the institutionalization and habituation of sets of practices and ideas.

I want to now address the question I have already raised, concerning the tautological nature of claims that a political field, for example, is made up of practices and processes of a “political” character. In his account of the limitations of field theory, Martin (2003, p. 8) suggests that “perhaps the biggest danger of field theory is a tendency toward tautology: since fields are only known by their effects...it is tempting to proliferate invisible fields that ‘explain’ whatever it is that we otherwise cannot explain”. Furthermore, as Warde points out, “it is not totally transparent how one identifies the activity which provides the content, or *raison d’être*, for the existence of a field” (2004, p. 14) in the first place. So for example, in my cultural-materialist account of social space, I have argued that a particular field is constituted by practices of that particular character, so that, say, a “political” field is constituted by “political” practices, without making it clear the grounds on which we can characterize a practice to be of a particular “character”—in this case, “political”—to begin with. As Warde (*ibid.*) continues in relation to Bourdieuan field theory,

The distinguishing characteristics of the relevant activity are not subject to specific analysis. As Lahire (1999, p. 41) complains, there is no once-and-for-all answer to the question “what is literature?” or “what is politics?”. Ultimately it is just what participants take it to be...Bourdieu skirts around the problem in a pragmatic fashion, implicitly appealing to common sense—the field of culture is about cultural production, that of politics about the activity of politicking.

What I want to suggest here is that there is nothing tautological about saying that how we theoretically model a field like “politics” takes as its starting point our pre-theoretical capacity to grasp the idea of “politics”, and to recognize the similarity of and connections between certain ideas and practices that have to do with power relations and decision-making. Of course, once we come to actually theorize it, we can then try to put a bit more rigour and precision on what has already been grasped pre-theoretically. In fact, the cultural-materialist understandings I have outlined here precisely encourage such looseness and flexibility in theoretical formulation, as this avoids those problems of reification associated with the separate spheres model, while not yet succumbing to the literally boundless conceptions of culture and economy which exist in cultural economy.

This, then, is the logic by which I think we should define each of the substantive categories or “fields” of culture, economy, politics, society and so on; and relatedly, the logic by which we should define processes or entities of a particular “character” (whether political, economic, cultural, social or whatever else). I will engage with the categories of culture and economy in greatest detail, though the same reasoning can be applied to other categories too.

Taking the category of the economic first, the economic has to do with production, consumption, distribution and exchange of resources. Mitchell (2002, p. 4) similarly catches this sense when he returns us to the original notion of “economy”—as opposed to “the economy”—as the “proper husbanding of resources and the intelligent management of their circulation”. Thus, when I say a practice, idea or entity has an economic character, I mean that it is in some fundamental sense concerned with the production, consumption, distribution or exchange of resources. For example, the market is an economic social relation and institution; the practice of growing a single crop for sale is an economic practice, and the *Chicago Mercantile Exchange* is an economic institution. This does not mean that any or all of these practices or institutions are wholly material. It does not mean that each does not *also* have a meaningful or symbolic aspect, or that each is not also inscribed into the practices of everyday life, or legitimized by, for example, the discourses of “progress” or pragmatism. This, after all, is precisely the claim of cultural materialism: all social practices, processes and institutions are necessarily both material *and* meaningful. But it does mean that each can be described as primarily or characteristically economic in nature or orientation. There can also be *ideas* of an economic character, as, for example, the idea of “efficiency”. The fact that this is an idea does not mean it belongs to the cultural field—or cultural sphere, as other have it—it is, quite clearly, an idea of economic character, operating primarily in an economic context. Where these practices, ideas and entities of an economic character cluster together, then, they form or appear as what I am calling the economic field. “The economy” is thus a heuristic term for the institutionalization and habituation of practices and ideas of an economic character.

The cultural has to do with beliefs, identities, stories, values and social meanings. Thus, when I say a practice, idea or entity has a cultural character, I mean that it is in some fundamental sense concerned with beliefs, identities, stories, values and social meanings. It is interesting to note that the everyday sense of culture as the space of the arts, literature and music in fact refers to social spaces where values, identity, stories and so on (what theorists refer to as “the cultural”) are realized and materialized in things such as books, paintings and songs, and even more concretely, in museums, galleries, cinemas, libraries, theatres and concert halls. But culture, as I intend it, does not simply refer to this tangible space of cultural artefacts and institutions. It is, as Williams claimed, material in another way too; that is, socially, as meanings are “offered, felt for, tested, confirmed, asserted, qualified, changed” in everyday conversations, engagements and actions (1983, p. 12), and where meanings, stories and values are captured, realized, materialized, produced and reproduced. It is important to remember that “culture” in this respect, is not purely ideal or ideational—it does not somehow “sit on top” of the “real world of things”, but is very much part of this world. Practices, ideas and entities of a cultural character are less obviously gathered in a single social space, or less closely clustered together, but where they are—or where we want to bracket these off for analysis—we can refer to this as the cultural field, or heuristically, as “culture”. This formulation does not rest upon a separation of the meaningful from the material, but the separation of processes, ideas and institutions of a cultural character from those of a primarily political or economic character. Thus, we can see that as I intend it, the cultural is not an ontological space or category, but a grouping of ideas and practices that have to do with meaning, identity, values, beliefs, ideologies and narratives. The fact that the cultural has more to do with ideas in the first instance, for their own sake, just as the economy has more to do directly with things, resources and material production in the first instance and for their own sake, does not make the category of the cultural an ideal category any more than it makes the economy a material category—though this is the slippage that has occurred in some social theory. “Culture”, then, is a heuristic term for the institutionalization and habituation of practices and ideas of a cultural character (i.e. to do with meanings, stories, narratives, artistry).

On these grounds, we see now that it is not helpful to say that the economy cannot be separated from culture, as it clearly can be. It should be further apparent now that this kind of claim arises from an inability to separate ideas and values from culture, for ideas and values operate just as much in what we call “the economy” as they do in the field of culture, though they are not the primary focus of that field, as they arguably are in the latter. We also see now that this conceptualization means it is possible to talk about “cultural processes” operating, for example, in the economy. By this we do not mean that the economy is itself a complex of material and ideal practices—it is, of course, but this is a different kind of claim, and an exemplar of a broader ontological orientation towards all social sites, with the economy no different from any other in this regard. Neither do we mean that everything in the economy is culturally constituted (as the poststructuralists contend), for this returns us to that idealizing perspective I am keen to avoid. What we do mean is that within economic institutions, beliefs, practices, systems and mechanisms of a “cultural” character—that is, to do with identity, shared norms, ideologies and time- or place-specific values—are also operative, even as the institutions and practices in question remain primarily of an economic character.

Although I have focused on the cultural and the economic here, we can apply the same reasoning to our understanding of other fields, and their constitutive “character”. For example, I suggest we take the political field to be constituted by struggles over, and activities concerning, the distribution of power and questions of decision-making. The field of the family arises out of actions which regulate the family ties among its participants. The legal field is constituted by the definition and then practice of law. Meanwhile, the social has to do with people and what they do collectively, how they organize themselves, interact and live together. Given that field analysis does not require the division of social space into mutually exclusive zones, we can see that, depending on the analytical focus, the same practices can appear in different fields at the same time. We can also see that the range of fields that make up social space are overlapping and intersecting, and are not confined to the “big four” of culture, economy, politics and society, but can include religious fields, artistic fields, scientific fields and many more.

7. Conclusion

What would be the consequences of introducing this cultural-materialist map of social space into cultural economy? My argument is that this cultural-materialist map should operate as an under-labourer for the discipline, providing a basis from which analysis can proceed, but not undermining the research agendas it addresses. Thus, studies in cultural economy can proceed with their own questions around the constitution of the cultural economy, the creative industries and the way cultural processes operate in the economy without making the claim that the whole social space is cultural. Furthermore, this cultural-materialist orientation provides a rationale for refusing to subsume the whole economy to the cultural economy, simply because it has symbolic content. That is, it suggests that it is possible—indeed, desirable—to define “the” cultural economy as a field itself, constituted by the economization or monetization of cultural forms and practices, and where certain ideas and actions pertaining to this are habituated and institutionalized. But this must be distinguished from the epistemological orientation of “cultural economy”, which, I have argued here, can be strengthened by the cultural-materialist insistence on the distinction between the ideal and the cultural.

Finally, to return to the question that I have raised at intervals over this paper—how does this conceptualization of social space help address the question of the relation of capitalism to the society of which it forms a part? I suggest that this model moves us beyond the problematic frameworks that position capitalism as either contained entirely by “the economy” or as somehow equivalent to the whole of society, to conceptualize the workings of capitalism in terms of a set of capitalistic practice and ideas which, though economic in character, are not confined to any single field of practice. Although this requires further work—something I address in *Identity and Capitalism* (2014) where I set out the cultural-materialist notion of a “social logic of capitalism”—I suggest that the cultural-materialist conception of social space developed here, in tandem with the notion of a social logic of capitalism, allows us to explain the dominance of the capitalist system, and its formative

influence on economic and non-economic practices, institutions and fields, without succumbing to economic determinism. It also offers a means of taking seriously the power of the “cultural” aspects of capitalism—the ideas, values, narratives and beliefs associated with capitalism—without lapsing into idealism, by working from a cultural-materialist perspective which insists upon the materiality and social embeddedness of these cultural forms and practices across disparate fields. The framework I have begun to develop here, then, is not just of value to cultural economy but also to that long and ongoing history of work in sociology and political economy which seeks to explore the relationship of capitalism to the society of which it forms a part.

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Notes

1. It is worth pointing out, I think, that Williams worked both within and against the paradigm of historical materialism, ultimately transcending aspects of its thinking, but remaining trapped by some of its conceptual apparatus.
2. In fact, these concepts are what enable Bourdieu to account for and explain relationships between different fields, as he understands homologous effects to occur between fields as a result of the reproduction of social class via the “habitus” (the embodied, habitual practices and dispositions of classed individuals). See Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) and Swartz (1997) for the clearest exposition of this conceptual framework.

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