

## BOOK REVIEW (send 2 Sept. 2011)

Robert Babe. *Cultural Studies and Political Economy; Toward a New Integration*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009. ISBN 978-0-7391-2366-9 (cloth), 978-0-7391-2367-6 (pbk), 978-7391-33198-5 (electronic).

Lest one consider the 90s' debate between representatives of 'critical political economy of communications' and 'cultural studies' as passé as Nirvana and 'Friends', the provocative new book by Robert Babe seeks to argue otherwise. In this time of political, social, and ecological catastrophes, great need exists for adequately grasping the communicative facets of current crises and theorizing adequate forms of response and action.

Unlike various partisans' accounts and to the author's credit, this book does not seek to establish the priority of one position over the other (although Babe clearly sees critical political economy as the more unjustly neglected of the two). Rather, it is a search for a Platonic middle ground, with all its attendant implications (rightly or wrongly) of compromise, balance, and equality. The goal is not to argue which position is wholly correct. Instead, it seeks ultimately to formulate a synthetic perspective that exemplifies the strengths and insights of both.

Chapters organized into two major sections lay out the book's case. The first section, "Genealogies," seeks to reconstitute the historical bases of the current split between political economy and cultural studies. The first chapter presents the intellectual bases of a critical political economy of communications. It also illustrates the initial fusion of 'cultural' concerns with 'material' ones, thus establishing for Babe that a unified critical practice is indeed possible because it had at one time existed. In doing so, it remaps well-worn categories in which specific theorists and scholars are often placed. For example, Babe identifies Adorno and Innis as the initial formulators of critical political economies of media and communications, albeit with some clear differences between them.

The second chapter does the same for cultural studies. Contrary to claims that cultural studies too amorphous and de-centered for characterization, Babe argues that its variety can be readily mapped by using poles of 'materialist' vs. 'idealist', and 'critical' vs. 'celebratory', thus yielding through their combination four general kinds of cultural studies. Doing so establishes the basis of the current split as an epistemological and political one. The institutional displacement particularly in the United States of cultural materialism (materialist, critical) by poststructuralism (idealist, critical) marks the fracturing of a unified critical scholarly practice and the formation of camps we see today.

While the Chapter 3 deals in detail with the political-economy/cultural-studies debate of the 1990s in order to elaborate and demonstrate the general claims made in Chapter 2, Chapter 4 (the last chapter in this first section) reconstitutes the rise of

poststructuralist perspectives in critical media research, and how its idealism (by relinquishing attention to material realities in favor of ungrounded textual analyses) ultimately and too easily plays 'into the hands of authoritarianism and despots' (130).

The second section of the book, titled "Portals for Dialogue," proposes and explores a set of topical, analytic centers that demonstrate not only the necessity of political-economic as well as cultural-studies perspectives, but topics in which the two camps might find some mutually beneficial common ground. Here the book tends to become more specialized and idiosyncratic, which may detract from its value for some readers. The chapters tackle money as a 'culturally based medium of communication'; the work of philosopher/essayist John Ralston Saul and geneticist/ecologist David Suzuki as they both extend Innis's notions of a time-space dialectic; and approaching digital communication through a 'dialectic of information' as a way to integrate matter, form, and interpretation and thus avoid the pitfalls both of brute empiricism and of idealism. The final chapter concludes with a bit more pessimistic assessment of the possibilities of a rapprochement of critical political economy and cultural studies through a comparison of ontologies employed by Innis and by Mark Poster.

The discussion is well-documented and clearly argued, and it is a model of close critical reading and scholarly synthesis. Babe approaches the topic as an intellectual history, with its case consisting primarily of a closely reasoned, deductive argument supported by specific excerpts from published sources.

The book also proves to be quite provocative. The extent to which its positions can be argued with testifies to the clarity with which they are proposed as well as to the innovativeness of their formulation. As noted earlier, not only placing Adorno with Innis together as initiators of a critical political economy of communication, but attributing this achievement to them in retrospect (neither of them identified their work in this way) raises a good debate about the validity of such categorizations and characterizations.

The book's sharp and definitive characterizations of such highly variable perspectives as 'poststructuralism' and 'cultural materialism' also spur healthy debate. Indeed, while Babe identifies 'cultural materialism' as an antidote to the idealism of poststructuralism, Raymond Williams's work (which he characterized late in his career as also 'cultural materialism') was roundly critiqued by some precisely for its idealism (see *Politics and Letters*).

In sum, however, the book contains not only one of a very few excellent summaries and analyses of this debate. It proposes an innovative framework for making sense of the debate, and for moving past it. For this, it should be widely read—and argued with—by scholars throughout the field.

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## REFERENCES

Williams, Raymond (1979.) *Politics and letters: interviews with New Left Review*.  
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