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CHAPTER

41 Political Theory and Cultural Studies

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Abstract

This article describes an interface between political theory and cultural studies, one that emerged with particular force and clarity in the work of American political theorists writing at the end of the twentieth century. It discusses the methodological contributions that resulted from this interface and analyses academic practices of political theory and cultural studies within national institutional histories. It suggests that the possibilities initially opened up by interfacial work need to be brought together into an integrated account of contemporary state power within the global capitalist economy.

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It is clear today that culture and economy have both so thoroughly transformed politics that it becomes difficult to recall when they did not.

Sheldon Wolin, "What Time Is It?"

1 Introduction

p. 752 A central question of political theory is “what is the political?” Political theorists pose this question in various ways. Some approach the political from what they understand to be beyond politics, as in divine or natural principles, say, or ↪ the acts of constitutive violence that establish polities. Others begin in the middle, in the messily materialized and embodied cultural, economic, affective vastness in which they happen to find (or search for) themselves and their world.¹ From this expansive givenness, they try to discern why what is taken to be political is configured one way rather than another, whether change is possible, and how it might come about. These theorists tend to be interested in questions of what it means for something to be political and of politicization. They are thus likely to engage critically the problem of how the political is produced.

In recent decades, such engagement has benefited from interlinking with cultural studies, a shifting configuration of the academic left that began in England and became particularly strong in US humanities in the 1980s and 1990s. Encompassing a range of inquiries into visual, material, textual, consumer, national, popular, sub-, and techno-cultures, cultural studies as a field imagines theory as informing practice, as transforming the world.

In this chapter, I describe an interface between political theory and cultural studies, one that emerged with particular force and clarity in the work of American political theorists writing at the end of the twentieth century. I specify the methodological contributions that resulted, contextualizing academic practices of political theory and cultural studies within national institutional histories. Moreover, I employ the methods I describe, problematizing the result in light of the demands of globalized capitalism and the hegemonization of the political field as a war on terrorism. In the context of globalized capital, fundamentalist resurgence, mass immiseration, and governance through spectacle, fear, and control, the possibilities initially opened up by interfacial work need to be brought together into an integrated account of contemporary state power within the global capitalist economy.

2 An Interface

p. 753 Given the spectacularized politics of networked entertainment culture, on one hand, and the mass attractions of fundamentalist visions of unified ↪ community in the face of extreme economic division, on another, it seems reasonable to assume that political theorists would be fully absorbed with cultural politics and the politics of culture. In a time and place where actors become governors and presidents, one would expect political theory to concentrate on the critical analysis of the production of political meanings, values, and expectations, on the generation of consent. Instead, in the United States most theorizing about politics carried out in political science departments displaces politics from its cultural and economic contexts. Research on the politics of culture, on the workings of power in a multiplicity of discursive fields apart from the state, has been carried out by scholars in the humanities, in departments of literature and language. The few political theorists institutionally located within the social sciences who have been part of the move to “theory” associated with (and often denigrated as) cultural studies tended to be marginalized by real or serious political theory.

For most of the 1970s and 1980s, political science journals and conferences gave center-stage to a theoretical debate between liberals and communitarians. This debate often branched into discussions of deliberation, justification, freedom, and rights. At the same time, and on into the new millennium, readings of canonical figures occupied much of the field. Only rarely did political theorists explicitly and deliberately produce their academic work as interventions in specific struggles. Or, perhaps it makes more sense to say that only rarely was such work published in mainstream journals in political science and political theory.

Theory and Event, published electronically by Johns Hopkins University Press, was inaugurated in 1997 in part to provide a location for politically engaged theory. Despite the obviousness of political and cultural interconnection, then, the academic practice of political theory has repressed inquiry into the cultural workings of power as if to disavow any trace of political bias and engagement.

One explanation for this rejection of cultural inquiry stems from the difference in the institutional sites, disciplinary histories, and methodological commitments of political theory and cultural studies. Political theory addresses the historical and contemporary relations among subjects, rationalities, and practices that go under the name of the political. In the United States, origin stories narrating the long and venerable history of political theory as a vocation played a crucial role in defending normative political theory from behaviorist and scientific attacks. For example, in an oft-cited intervention at a key point in this battle, Sheldon Wolin writes, “Testimony ↵ that such a vocation has existed is to be found in the ancient notion of the *bios theoretikos* as well as in the actual achievements of the long line of writers extending from Plato to Marx” (Wolin 1969, 1078). Although Wolin is careful not to reduce political theory to a tradition of textual analysis—and, indeed, he asserts the importance of “epic” political theories that address problems in the world—he conceptualizes it nonetheless in terms of a line of thinkers all of whom sought to “reassemble the political world” (Wolin 1969, 1078).

In contrast, cultural studies consists of a loose affiliation of dispersed interdisciplinary research and political projects that span a wide variety of subjects and concerns and rarely claim a history much earlier than Antonio Gramsci. The stories of its origins in studies of English working-class culture and the political character of postwar Britain emphasize this diversity, linking cultural studies to popular and subcultural sites of semiotic resistance and avowedly political intentions. “Cultural studies is not one thing,” Stuart Hall asserts, “it has never been one thing” (Hall 1990, 11). Cultural studies presents itself, then, less as an ongoing conversation than as an intervention (Grossberg, Nelson, and Treichler 1992, 5).

Despite the institutional asymmetries between political theory and cultural studies, in the last decades of the twentieth century there emerged an interface between them useful for thinking about the inextricability of politics and culture. I use the term “interface” because these approaches do not constitute a discourse or debate. The work at the interface of political theory and cultural studies is not a blending of the strengths and insights of two fields into something new. Instead, this interface is a contingent, interlinked, and changing configuration of thinking from two sites about the contemporary world and the production of the political.

As it affirms the importance of understanding *how* something is political, interfacial work attends to the risks of presuming in advance that a specific cultural, discursive, or institutional site is already or necessarily political or that an analytical intervention is political enough. Put bluntly, political theory risks oversimplifying its accounts when it fails to acknowledge the present imbrications of politics in culture. Cultural studies risks a similar oversimplification as well as non-intervention by presuming its political purchase in advance. Mindful of these risks, interfacial work suggests four methods for engaged research into the production of the political: problematization, contextualization, specification, and pluralization.

3 Four Methods

The first way interfacial political theory/cultural studies frames questions of the political is *problematization*. Problematization involves critical reading and theoretical interrogation of practices and performances that disrupt “the way things are done around here.” Why, we might ask, is security more often a stated goal of politics than is pleasure? Or, what sort of politics do cars and computers have? What's at stake in asking and answering these questions? To problematize the political renders customary patterns of thinking about politics strange, out of place, and in need of explanation.

For example, Thomas Dumm explores the ordinary as a repository of political imaginings, something distinct from the objectively known “facts” of positivist social science, on the one side, and the disruption of events, on the other (Dumm 1999, 2000). His work reminds us that democracy as a living, breathing practice entails more than this doublet, where too much thinking today remains trapped. Attunement to the ordinary problematizes this configuration, drawing attention to the way the opposition of technocracy and spectacle depoliticizes democracy. In sum, to problematize the political is to ask why and how a political formation comes to have a particular shape. It is to appreciate the contingency present in any conception of politics so as to think better about how arrangements might be otherwise.

Second, interfacial political theory/cultural studies situates political questions in the contexts of the present. The method of *contextualization* contests political theories claiming to provide an Archimedean point or “view from nowhere” that can set out universal principles of justice or the basic tenets of a consensus about justice common to late-capitalist democracies. Contextualization foregrounds the excesses that always escape and subvert the concepts through which the political is formatted, materialized, and lived.

Anne Norton's work on representation demonstrates the importance of an attunement to the contexts in which political ideas circulate. She translates key tenets of American liberalism into everyday practices like eating, dressing, and shopping. Such practices enact assumptions that freedom means choice and that people represent themselves and exercise authority when they choose freely. By contextualizing liberalism in quotidian activities, moreover, Norton draws out the way these activities challenge its basic premises. “They reveal coercion in the context of choice. They show the power of the representation to overcome that which it purports to represent” (Norton 1993, 85–6). ↪ Concepts are more than text-dwelling word assemblages or sound-bites spewed from the mouths of politicians. They are loci of continued hope, aspiration, critique, and appeal.

Contextualization involves the effort to sort through the various elements linked together in a given political constellation (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 96). Perhaps most importantly today, under conditions of communicative capitalism and permanent war, contextualization enables political and cultural theorists to analyze depoliticization, the means through which issues, identities, and events are taken out of political circulation, blocked from the agenda, or presumed to have already been solved.

A third way of framing questions of the political is *specification*. By this I mean not simply an attunement to difference, but to the relations through which differences are produced, through which generalities and specificities are observed, measured, demanded, and replicated. Thus, Michael Shapiro, in a nuanced account of political theory as a textual practice, specifies the “preconstituted meaning systems” underlying conversations about politics (Shapiro 1992, 10). Explicitly presenting his work as a critical intervention, Shapiro differentiates and politicizes the linguistic forms, economies of meaning, productions of space, and narrative conventions enabling political theory and policy processes. Such an operation is at work in Shapiro's reading of Robert Bellah et al.'s *Habits of the Heart* in light of Don DeLillo's novel about the Kennedy assassination, *Libra*. Although *Habits of the Heart* is ostensibly a realistic presentation of data gathered through systematic, in-depth interviews with a variety of American citizens, by juxtaposing *Habits* with *Libra*, Shapiro demonstrates the underlying univocity engendered by the authors' failure to specify the diverse and antagonistic identifications and spatializations that mark contemporary lives. In contrast, *Libra* sets out conflicting voices grappling with circumstances and meaning. Paradoxically, the conflicts of split subjects shine through the fictional words of one author even as they are erased by a multiply-authored work that draws from so-called “real life” conversations with actual people. Through specification, then, work at the interface of political theory and cultural studies theorizes the connections between immediate images and events and larger structures, relations, processes, and assemblages of power.

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Finally, interfacial work addresses the production of the political through *pluralization*. To pluralize the political is to reject the idea that politics must be centered in the state, understood as the activity of parties, and explained ↪ through analyses of voting behavior. Inspired by Marx's focus on the economy, critical race scholarship on ethnicity, feminist accounts of privacy, and queer theory's attention to sexuality, pluralization multiplies the sites and categories that "count" as political. William Connolly's compilation of a list designed to stimulate further pluralization gives a sense of this rich surplus of political possibilities. He includes a micropolitics of action, a politics of disturbance, a politics of enactment, a politics of representational assemblages, a politics of interstate relations, and a politics of non-statist, cross-national movements (Connolly 1995, xxi). Not surprisingly, pluralization encompasses the methods as well as the contents of political analysis. Different modes of politics will suggest different protocols of research (Grossberg, Nelson, and Treichler 1992, 2).

Nevertheless, even as pluralization opens up thinking about politics, one might ask about its limits: Could the radical extension of pluralization eliminate collectivity and culminate in a multitude of singularities, to use Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's term (Hardt and Negri 2000)? Is pluralization another word for fragmentation or even a variation of post-Fordist economics' emphasis on market differentiation? Although such risks are possible, the outcome is not inevitable. When conjoined with the three other methods characteristic of interfacial work—problematization, contextualization, and specification—pluralization can prove a reminder of the productive abundance flowing through and exceeding the political. Conversely, as components of political intervention, these other three methods will entail or demand constraining, if only momentarily, urges to pluralize. Stuart Hall explains that cultural studies "can't be simply pluralist.... It does have some will to connect; it does have some stake in the choices it makes" (Hall 1992, 278). That something is *at stake* is what makes cultural studies political. And politics, Hall rightly argues, is impossible without "arbitrary closure" (Hall 1992, 278). Contextualization and specification help dissipate this arbitrariness somewhat, but of course not entirely: Closure must itself be subsequently problematized, its own arbitrariness opened up and made subject to critical inquiry.

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I turn now to the institutional contexts of political theory and cultural studies, briefly considering the emergence of cultural studies in Britain before focusing on developments in the United States. The same themes have different meanings and impacts in different contexts. In the following sections, I explore these contexts. To show how British cultural studies enabled ↪ a powerful analysis of a particular state formation, I concentrate on the contributions of Stuart Hall. To consider the way institutional arrangements in the United States led away from emphases on the state and the economy, even as they provided insight into American political culture, I highlight the work of Michael Rogin.

4 Stuart Hall and British Cultural Studies

Inspired by Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1958, 1970), Raymond Williams' *Culture and Society* (1958) and *The Long Revolution* (1961), and E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), the birth of British cultural studies is generally associated with the 1964 founding of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham by Hoggart and Stuart Hall. Over the next two decades, as education in England faced severe economic hardship, cultural studies came to be offered as an undergraduate degree in nine British polytechnics (and two universities, including Birmingham): It provided a useful umbrella for humanities departments under economic pressure to reorganize (Steedman 1992, 620).

Generally speaking, the research associated with the Birmingham school focused on the processes shaping postwar British society: the rise of mass communications, the increase in consumerism and resulting commodification of more domains of life, and racial and national forms of oppression. Some of this research

is linked to a frustration with Marxism. Not only are Marx's categories of base and superstructure and false consciousness too reductive and determinist for cultural analysis, but the British New Left had already, in the wake of the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956, distanced itself from Marxist politics (Hall 1992, 279). On one hand, and no doubt paradoxically, this distance from Marxism appears in the systematic engagement with Gramsci and the extension of his accounts of hegemony, civil society, the wars of position and maneuver, contradictory consciousness, and the organic intellectual. On the other hand, it appears in the study of subcultures: Class needed to be specified, perhaps in terms of sex or race, perhaps in terms of consumption-based patterns of identity construction.

p. 759 This specification helpfully sheds light on the production of class identities, offering thereby a corrective to Marxist essentialism, and providing a useful analysis of the construction of hegemony, while, however, sliding into a celebration of style. Innovative appropriations of popular culture are viewed as forms of resistance, as part of a political struggle taking place in everyday life. One problem with such accounts, which have been heavily criticized *within* cultural studies, is that they presume their political purchase in advance, fail to link to a larger politics, and fail to explain why a particular stylistic performance resists rather than shores up a hegemonic formation or why its resistance connects it to progressive struggles for social justice rather than fascist aspirations for domination (Slack and Whitt 1992, 578–84; Grossberg 1992, 93–5). The strongest work in British cultural studies was shaped through struggle—theoretical and practical—with Marxism. Engagement with Marxism means retaining an emphasis on the economy while problematizing Marxist categories when researchers are led to ask how it is possible for workers, the people, the least well-off, to support policies clearly contradictory to their material interests.

For example, Stuart Hall contextualizes the Thatcher government in post-war Britain. In the initial decades after the Second World War, Britain was headed toward European-style social democracy. The postwar combination of “big state and big capital” was the result of a compromise between left and right: the right settled for the welfare state and Keynesian economic policy while the left agreed to work within the fundamental terms of capitalism. Responding to the massive upheavals of the late 1960s and 1970s (world economic recession, inability to finance a welfare state *and* sustain capital accumulation and profitability, industrial conflict, strikes, and violent racism against immigrants), Thatcherism reversed the previous consensus, reconstructed the social order, and “changed the currency of political thought and argument” such that “free” meant “free market” (Hall 1988, 40). Instead of supporting the welfare state, Thatcherism sought to “break its spell” by combining an emphasis on the free market with the traditional Tory elements of order, nation, unity, and patriarchy. The result was the previously paradoxical articulation of “free market *and* strong state” (Hall 1988, 39). Thatcherism effected a revaluation of British values: what had been positively articulated with the state (providing for basic needs, say) came to be understood as a private benefit of a free market.

p. 760 For Hall, one of the most striking aspects of Thatcherism is its popular support, especially among those sectors of society a stereotypic Marxist analysis would expect to oppose it. Presenting itself as a force on the side of the people, Thatcherism enlisted popular consent “through a combination of the imposition of social discipline from above—an iron regime for Iron Times—and of populist mobilization from below,” a combination Hall characterizes as “authoritarian populism” (Hall 1988, 40–1). Thatcherism was the result of ideological struggle, a transformation and reconfiguration of right-wing discourses to enable a new way of thinking to be dominant. How did this new common sense emerge? Hall's specific analysis of concrete institutions makes clear that there was nothing automatic or magical (like some spell over consciousness) about it. The emergence of Thatcherism was the result of decades of ideological warfare, the securing of authority or consent prior to the taking of power. Thus, well before Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister in 1979, the Institute for Economic Affairs and the Centre for Policy Studies were advancing free market doctrines and supporting anti-Keynesian economists. Likewise, the tabloid press took up the emphases on order, unity, and nation glorifying Thatcherism and Thatcher herself. As Hall explains, “these

organizations prepared the ground, were the trenches and fortifications, the advance outposts in civil society itself, from which the counteroffensive to the reigning consensus was launched. ... They helped make the 'intolerable' thinkable" (Hall 1988, 47).

Thatcherism was the product of battles of ideas, opinions, and values fought out in the space of civil society, a space not reducible to the media. Academic institutions, think tanks, and private organizations contributed the ideas and helped articulate them together into Thatcherism. For Hall, what is crucial to understanding Thatcherism is not simply the plurality of discourses (race, crime, nation, sexuality, market) that produce it within civil society, but the formation of this plurality of ideological elements into a unity, or discursive formation, at the level of the state (Hall 1988, 53). Thatcherism was a hegemonic structure with authority constituted through the production of common sense, a rendering of what was heretofore unimaginable as the new fact of life ("yes, the market is imperfect, but we have no other choice ...").

p. 761 In sum, the position of British cultural studies at the margins of the British economy, in a context of struggle with Marxism, and as an effort to engage an emerging right-wing alliance that had come to power in the wake of widespread social, economic, and political disruption—"authoritarian populism"—gave it analytical power and political purchase, indeed, truth (cf. Žižek 2001, 220). The projects associated with cultural studies endeavored to make sense of the specific condition of Britain after the Second World War, ↳ in terms of new forms of mass culture and in light of the restructuring of British social democracy and the dissipation of left politics (cf. Smith 1994).

I turn now to the American context, to consider the specificity of the situation of American political theory as it encountered the culture wars of the 1980s. What will become clear is the way that a sense of the dominance of cultural politics (as opposed to the marginality of a venture called cultural studies), on the one hand, combined with the demands of political science, on the other, formatted political theory's cultural turn so as to distance it from the state.

5 Culture War in the USA

Sometime in the late 1980s and early 1990s, intellectual common sense in the USA came to reflect a consensus that *everything* was political. Voices raised from a variety of sectors joined in the observation that culture had become political and politics cultural. In the words of Sheldon Wolin, "It is hard to think of an action, much less a relationship, that someone has not declared to be 'political' or involve 'politics' or, its shorthand 'power.' It is not at all clear today what would not count as politics" (Wolin 1997). Following feminist theorizations of the personal, familial, and sexual as sites of power and domination, anti-racist accounts of the widespread practices of discrimination and disempowerment accompanying—and often negating—formal gains at the level of rights, hot debates over public art and education, not to mention the emergence of new experiments in living associated with the rejection of the Eisenhower-era establishment, by the end of the 1980s, it seemed clear that the term "political" referred to more than the competition between parties for a leading position in government. Indeed, with the end of the cold war and the intensification of financial and information flows through the networks of communicative capitalism, the state ceased to be the primary site of political engagement; the nation no longer served as a central locus of political identification, and the sovereign configuration of political power began to be reformatted. How might democratic concerns for equity, justice, freedom, and right represent themselves under such conditions? To whom, for example, should rights claims be addressed? How might a specific instantiation of violence or suffering be universalized so as to represent harms that extend beyond it?

p. 762 The observation that "everything is political" is not simply descriptive, however. It is a lament. That politics is everywhere is thought to be a *problem*: "too much" politics "drives out" other important human practices or modes of being. Former chair of the National Endowment of the Humanities, Lynne Cheney, captured the

moment when she writes: “Every statement in every text (or not in a text, for that matter) was said to be political, said to be aimed at advancing the interest of the speaker or writer ... Politics writ small had become politics written so large that it drove out the possibility of human beings doing anything nonpolitical—such as encouraging the research for truth” (Cheney 1995, 15). Prominent political theorists voiced similar concerns. Amy Gutmann treated multicultural education as the “deconstruction” of intellectual life into “a political battlefield of class, gender, and racial interests,” reducing “every answer to an exercise of political power” (Gutmann 1992, 20).

During the culture wars, the charge that “everything is political” evoked nostalgia for a time before politics actively politicized culture even as it itself intensified the politicalization of culture. Organizations such as the Traditional Values Coalition, Concerned Women of America, and the American Family Association, for example, mobilized during the 1980s and 1990s in opposition to changes in cultural norms governing gender and sexuality. In the name of decency, security, and basic values, activists targeted museums, school districts, entertainment, workplaces, and the Internet. Their goal was to recapture a culture gone astray amid a general crisis of governability. And, as Barbara Cruikshank argues, even as they ostensibly supported an end to big government, many of these neoconservatives nevertheless understood that reclaiming the culture would necessarily require a strong state, to enforce personal responsibility, buttress heterosexual marriage, prohibit abortion, promote sexual abstinence, and instill respect for law and order (Cruikshank 2000).

Like the differentiated strands of the British right, then, those in the USA have operated in a variety of domains in civil society. They have reasserted the primacy of the free market, urged privatization, dismantled the minimal entitlements left from the New Deal, and shrunk the welfare state through massive tax cuts. And, they have reaffirmed (while redirecting) the political messages of the 1960s, namely, the centrality of raced and sexed identity and the importance of culture as the tool and terrain of struggle. Thus, the charge that “everything is political” is a powerful weapon of cultural warfare. It shields those who wield it as it blames academic “deconstructionists” and “multiculturalists” for widespread cultural dislocations resulting from movements in transnational corporate capital; shifts to information, consumption, and distribution-based economies; expansions in entertainment media and content; the violence of urban decay and rural despair.

The lament that everything is political is also depoliticizing: if *everything* is already political, there's no need to bother with organizing, consciousness-raising, or critique. The cliché that everything is political does not tell us what makes an event or text a matter of politics, or how disconnected figures and themes become linked together into a particular power formation. In assuming the fact of politics, the totalizing shorthand of “everything” neglects the ways concepts and issues come to be political common sense and the processes through which locations and populations are rendered as in need of intervention, regulation, or quarantine.

Despite the depoliticization the claim perversely effects, the notion that everything is political marks a change in the political situation of late-capitalism, namely, the decentering or changed role of the state. Everything seems political because the political is not confined to one specific location or set of actions. The new social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, for example, targeted families, media, churches, schools, medicine, consumption, identity, and sexuality, making specific economic, cultural, and social practices political (Cohen and Arato 1992; Dean 1996). Through global capital and networked communications technologies, the new social movements often traversed national, ethnic, and racial barriers producing new formations of identity and affiliation. One of the strengths of cultural studies in the USA has been its connection with these movements, extending them into universities and providing supporting research and analysis. The formation of women's, ethnic, and African-American studies departments, as well as the opening up of traditional disciplines to the study of non-traditional populations, texts, arrangements of living, and cultural productions has been a political struggle.

6 Michael Rogin and US Political Theory

p. 764 Although some academic political theorists (primarily feminists) have been active participants in the creation of women's and ethnic studies programs, many argue against pluralizing political inquiry into cultural domains. ↪ Sheldon Wolin worries that the dispersion of politics is part of political theory's "inability or refusal to articulate a conception of the political in the midst of widely differing claims about it, some issuing from nontraditional claimants" (Wolin 1997). David Held invokes the specter of totalitarianism, the risk that widespread politicization opens up the door to an intrusive state (Held 1991, 6).

A partial explanation for this opposition toward an expanded sense of the political may be found in the institution of American political science. In the last decades of the twentieth century, the field was beset by methodological battles. Many emphasized the *scientific* component of political science, hoping to discover methods for empirical analysis that would enable political scientists, like orthodox economists, to measure and predict with reasonable accuracy. Grants and funding opportunities, of course, were also awarded within this context. Bluntly put, the big money in political science was concentrated in the subfields of international relations and American politics (where the use of scientific methods predominated), and this may have had an impact on political theory.

Political theorists, particularly at leading institutions, sought to delimit the field in accordance with political science's concept of the state. As Dumm explains:

This perspective on power, which reduces it to state power, informs the recent detente between the followers of Habermas and Rawls. Advocates of procedures that would somehow ensure communicative action and their counterparts who embrace a liberalism of fear recently have found a common ground in the slogan "procedural democracy." That form of democracy has as its exclusive site of struggle the contemporary state. Moreover, it is a state that is itself understood to be largely devoid of struggle and is presented as a place where through adequate procedures, all differences might be successfully negotiated. (Dumm 1994, 170–1)

p. 765 State-centered, mainstream political theory dismisses such alternative forms and sites of politics as consumption and consumerism, science and technology, and the constitution of subjects and objects of politics. To echo Foucault, if politics is analyzed on the basis of the state, then the political subject can only be conceived as the subject of law (Foucault 1997, 300). The possibility of politics in other fora starts to sound invasive, an invitation to massive state intervention, or naive, a misunderstanding of what politics is. Under the presumption that the state remains the political center, the idea that politics is everywhere in culture sounds like an alarmist rant, evoking the propagandistic machinations of the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, and cold ↪ war America. Presuming that politics necessarily targets the state, in other words, contributes to the depoliticizing effects of the claim that everything is political. It makes non-state centered action, and, more specifically, cultural politics, seem at best ineffectual or irrelevant, and, at worst, paranoid. It also allows those ready to mobilize on a variety of terrains to proceed without a fight.

Perhaps surprisingly, even within this context, innovative thinking emerged. Exemplary in this regard is the work of political theorist Michael Rogin who worked against the grain of 1980s political theory to analyze mass cultural productions of political identities. His work, along with that of previously mentioned scholars such as William Connolly, Thomas Dumm, Anne Norton, and Michael Shapiro, helped to establish a place, however marginal, within political theory for culturally engaged and politically committed scholarship.

In his introduction to *Ronald Reagan: The Movie*, Rogin presents his emphasis on film as an attempt, "against dominant tendencies in the study and practice of American politics, to use cultural documents to connect political action to its meaning and makers" (Rogin 1987, xx). To this end, Rogin explores practices of demonization and counter-subversion in the United States. One of the first works in American political

theory to engage seriously with images, seeing, surveillance, and mass political integration, *Ronald Reagan: The Movie* rejects liberal individualism to consider how leaders come to embody the body politic. It takes neither identity nor affiliation for granted, theorizing instead the ways in which specific cultural productions stimulate the fears and anxieties mobilized in right-wing politics. Drawing from psychoanalysis, film theory, cold war science-fiction, and the B-films of Ronald Reagan and incorporating critiques of racism, sexism, and anti-communism, this text seems easily an exercise in cultural studies.

Yet, Rogin never linked his work to cultural studies. Indeed, he distanced himself from cultural studies in a later significant contribution to cultural history and political theory, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants and the Hollywood Melting Pot*, asking, “Does resistance to elite domination appear when we turn our attention from traditional political arenas and reconceive politics in broad, cultural terms?” (Rogin 1996, 23). Answering no, Rogin situates his historical analysis of the role of blackface in producing an American national identity at the interface of a critique of liberalism and a rejection of a celebratory (ahistorical and unspecific) approach to racial masquerade as subversion and resistance. He demonstrates how, despite some 1990s excitement over the parodic performance of identity, blackface was not a radical practice but a mode of integration: it facilitated the move of ethnic settlers into normalized whiteness. By accepting their difference from blackness they were able to claim and access the privileges of white identity. For Rogin, liberal rights and blackface are reciprocal enactments of racial crossing, the one promising whiteness for the black man even as the other reinscribes racial difference. As he concludes, “There are, finally, no simple, morally reassuring splits between egalitarian politics and exploitive popular culture, or (from the other point of view) between admiration for distinctive cultural contributions and a falsely universal uniformity. Instead of choosing sides between mass culture and liberal politics in America, it is better to untangle the knot that ties them together” (Rogin 1996, 67).

By the time of *Blackface, White Noise*, cultural studies in the United States had become associated, perhaps wrongly, with celebratory approaches to popular culture that found resistance everywhere, in all sorts of performances of transgressive identity and acts of creative resignification of dominant cultural images. Such approaches are rightly criticized for announcing their political efficacy in advance; that is, for eschewing the analytical and organizational work necessary to political struggle. In place of concrete attention to political institutions, practices, organizations, or norms, celebratory cultural studies tends to label its analysis “political” without exploring what, exactly, is political about it. Occluding the tensions and contradictions traversing cultural productions, problematization is reduced to simply taking a position, repeating and reinforcing the flattening effects of the political everything.

7 Integration, State, and Economy

What, then, of the interface between cultural studies and political theory in the new millennium? At the outset, I pointed to four methods emerging at this interface: problematization, contextualization, specification, and pluralization. To continue my own contextualization of this interface, I will conclude by specifying those aspects of post-millennial life that indicate the need to problematize the emphasis on pluralization, attending not simply to proliferating micropolitics but also to the continued importance of the state.

During the 1990s, the neoliberal economic policies of privatization, markets, and the elimination of key social services pursued by Thatcher and Reagan intensified and accelerated across the globe (UN Habitat 2003, 36). Reduced trade barriers, deregulated financial systems, and networked communications technologies led to dramatic increases in the flow of goods, capital, jobs, and information worldwide. Economies floundering in a brutally competitive environment could receive loans, but only under strict conditions determined by neoliberal doctrine—state services had to be cut, utilities privatized, price

subsidies removed, and restrictions on capital flow eliminated. “In a number of cases,” *The Global Report on Human Settlements 2003* explains, “the conduct of privatization was done in a great hurry under overwhelming pressure from foreign advisers, and the result was ‘outright theft.’ Public assets were sometimes sold to the private sector for a fraction of their true worth” (UN Habitat 2003, 44). The clear result of globalized neo-liberalism has been dramatic increases in inequality and insecurity, within countries as well as between them.

Such an economic context is accompanied by an ideological matrix polarized between fundamentalism and pluralism; that is to say, between dogmatic and irreconcilable positions, on the one side, and a seeming multitude of endless choices and possibilities, on the other. Fundamentalist emphases on limits, boundaries, and order and pluralist enthusiasm for multiplicity and diversity unfold within the frame of global capital.

In the course of the presidency of George W. Bush, the culture war entered a new stage of Republican hegemony. The right's cultural successes won for it control over the three branches of government and the general political discourse. Previously extreme positions—regressive taxation, cuts in benefits for veterans, time limits on welfare benefits, privatizing social security, and the torture of prisoners of war—became acceptable policy alternatives, debated by both political parties in the context of their unquestioning endorsement of neoliberal capitalism (Brown 2003). The intolerable is thinkable.

Just as contemporary capitalism relies on market segmentation, selling previously transgressive identities as lifestyle choices with their own entertainment networks, websites, and accessories, so does the political right thrive on pluralization. The more conservatives have to be outraged about—as talk radio, right-wing blogs, and Fox News have realized—the more engaged and active they are. And, the more they fight on the terrain of culture, protesting gay marriage and partial birth abortion and asserting the primacy of their particular values, the more the politics of the economy are displaced (Frank 2004).

Pluralization and limit recombine into the guise of mobility and fixity when we consider intellectual labor in the context of the flows and fears of communicative capitalism (Dean 2002, 2004). Intellectuals privileged by citizenship and institutional affiliation travel frequently, spending time in transitional spaces such as planes, hotels, and airports. They may think of themselves as cosmopolitan world citizens, as participants in world-historical discussions that transcend disciplinary or national boundaries. Other intellectuals are forced to migrate, to serve as itinerant, contingent, academic piece-workers. They teach heavy loads with few benefits and less security. Often they are pushed out of the academy altogether, forced into exile and deported. Those with time to write may lack the resources and opportunities to attend academic meetings and publish their work. Those who do publish may despair at the unlikelihood that what they write will register in the discussions that matter to them. Institutions like universities and nations are thus bars separating privileged from forced mobility. Communicative capitalism's claims to cosmopolitanism, inclusion, and significance notwithstanding, its mobility depends on fixity.

An insight shared by some structuralists and post-structuralists is that the subject is a position within a structure. Outside a structure, there is no subject. As an example, one might imagine Sean “Puffy” Combs and Dennis Thompson (or Budd Hopkins and Judith Butler) encountering each other in an airport privileged flyers lounge. Known in their respective fields and recognized as important and powerful within specific institutions, their work cannot easily traverse the barriers that enable their mobility. The significance of their writings is limited to particular contexts, contexts with only limited porosity. Citationally invoking one to the other as an authority is incomprehensible.

The point is that multiplicity coexists with and relies on positionality. Multiple discourses and institutions entail multiple fixed positions and these different positions are not interchangeable. The positions that enable meaning also set its limiting conditions. Conviction in one's fundamentals unfolds within the

conflictual space opened up by encounters with others; an appeal to the truths of one's faith, like the drive to justify one's principles, is a response to doubts, challenges, differences. Similarly, the linking and sampling of various terms and ideas in new and evolving contexts occurs against the background of a more fundamental bar or limit.

p. 769 This interdependence of plurality on positionality presents several challenges to interfacial work today. First, it suggests that critical scholars need to attend to the contexts of pluralization, to specify the ways in which capitalism's absorption of ever more domains of life operates through differentiation, multiplication, and fragmentation. Second, insofar as fundamentalist and neoconservative orientations thrive on various and repeated opportunities for renewing rage, critical political theorists need to emphasize and develop understandings of underlying patterns and systems so as to replace fragmented rage with engaged commitment to building broader alliances and solidarities. How might work at the interface of political theory and cultural studies redirect animosities currently constituted as oppositions between Christian and atheist, conservative and liberal, and patriotic and traitorous, into an economic struggle capable of using state power for common ends? Third, current oscillations between mobility and fixity challenge us to think through current limitations on thought: Can political theory conceptualization commonalities capable of inspiring us to move against the deadly brutality of capitalism run amok?

8 Conclusion

The interface of political theory and cultural studies is neither a debate nor a discourse. Rather, it is a loose set of thinkers and texts sharing some political and methodological concerns. Cultural studies emerges in Britain in the context of the weakening of the left in the wake of the collapse of the welfare state and the rise of Thatcherism. Connected to but critical of Marxism, thinkers affiliated with cultural studies sought to provide rich accounts of the cultural productions of subjectivity, hegemony, and resistance. These thinkers worked outside traditional disciplines and outside most universities. In the last two decades of the twentieth century, academics, pundits, and politicians in the United States exchanged salvos in culture wars over sex, race, class—and family values. Cultural studies was associated primarily with the humanities, seemingly the academic wing of the left in the culture war. Most political theory within political science was disciplined p. 770 by the field's infatuation with formal modeling and the lingering effects of cold war anti-Marxism. Political theorists pushing against these constraints problematized the presumptions regarding the nature of the political generally presumed by the rest of the field, pluralized their inquiries, and thereby opened up thinking to a multiplicity of domains beyond the state.

The methodological commitments of work at the interface of cultural studies and political theory—problematization, specification, contextualization, and pluralization—make this mode of inquiry particularly compelling today. Problematization pushes theorists to consider how both the political right and global capital thrive on the proliferation of seemingly political instances even as this proliferation insures that nothing really changes, that the fundamental neoliberal economic framework remains intact. Specification and contextualization attune thinkers to the cultural habitats of political concepts, to the practices, aspirations, harms, and fears in and through which our basic ideas of living together are materialized. Finally, the pluralization of the political compels interfacial scholars, even as they methodologically pluralize their inquiries, to orient political theories toward opposition, struggle, change, and a fundamentally different arrangement of power.

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Notes

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- 1 I take the idea of beginning in the middle from Bill Connolly's response to questions from Charles Larmore at a symposium on weak ontology held at Northwestern University, March 2004.