

CONFERENCE REPORT

Space, Inequality and Difference: 'Radical Turns' and 'Cultural Turns'

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The cruise which departed from Naxos in 1983 and, successively, sighted land in Lesbos, Samos, Lemnos and Syros, 'The Seminars of the Aegean', reached the peaceful and shining port of Milos in August 1996. As usual in this series of seminars, the charming organization (excellent in both academic and logistical aspects) was led by colleagues of the Department of Urban and Regional Planning of the National Technical University of Athens, the Department of Urban and Regional Planning, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, and the Faculty of Geography, University of the Aegean. In the intervening years the seminars have acquired significant recognition within academic and policy-making circles as a privileged forum within which to reflect on the social and spatial implications of European integration, changes in urban and regional systems, restructuring of industrial areas and labour markets, etc.

The main subject of the Milos seminar ("Space, inequality and difference: from 'radical' to 'cultural' formulations?") addressed a recently observed 'cultural turn' in radical political economy and the challenge which such a shift in academic focus portends for an ongoing emancipatory politics in the present world. A discussion of culture and its increasing analytical purchase for understanding the workings of the contemporary economy arises in apparently paradoxical fashion against the backdrop of nearly a decade in which neo-liberal markets have enjoyed free-reign following the collapse of state-led socialism in the East and the retrenchment of the welfare state in much of Western Europe. Yet for many on the Left, these events have prompted a deep re-evaluation of traditional Marxist categories of analysis rooted in the dichotomous relations of capital and class, in part because they are perceived as having been inadequate to the task of grasping the complexity of social and economic change leading to and following the remarkable events of 1989. As a complementary analytical unit, culture, it is posited, may offer a far richer account of the multiple determinations affecting social life today, from the formation of broad-based resistance movements to successful regional economic development trajectories within the framework of the 'hollowed out' nation-state.

First references to 'new directions' in cultural geography may be found in the second half

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of the 80s in international conferences, special journal issues and several essential books: within little more than a decade, a supposed 'new cultural geography' was initiated, institutionalized and rejected by some. That 'cultural turn' led to a deep questioning of the politics of representation, with new concerns for the 'other' and the creation and reproduction of voice, visibility, text and discourse (and also as a contribution to the post-colonial and orientalist debates). Certainly those new cultural formulations involved a redefinition of the political: from the work-based definitions of social class, the emphasis turned towards the more attractive (and also more vague) concepts of identity, difference and otherness. Research interests changed from the economic geographies of production to the cultural geographies of consumption.

The participants at the Milos Seminar had the opportunity to deepen this debate and to analyze the consequences of this cultural turn in regional studies and political economy. Conference papers clustered about key subthemes according to the several existing debates: the culturalization of economy and the economization of culture, the role of the state in cultural and economic shifts, the emergence of new cultural identities and the redefinition of citizenship, etc. Nevertheless, the main subject of the debate was the usefulness of culture as an analytical variable for bringing new insights to radical political economy's traditional concerns with uneven spatial development, urban and regional restructuring, social inequalities, and consequent progressive political projects.

Ray Hudson (University of Durham) warned that the use and abuse of soft concepts such as knowledge and learning as elements of regional analysis, may mask the reinforcement of local and regional inequalities in a different but still uneven development of capitalism. Similarly, for Diane Perrons (London School of Economics) the post-modern appeal to culture and diversity gives rise to idiographic studies of little policy relevance: by focusing on the individual, the cultural turn may lose sight of the broader structures of production and reproduction. Using the concept of political ecology, Alain Lipietz (CEPREMAP, Paris) proposed to achieve new links between political economy, culture and space; difference and inequality can be rooted, then, not only in present relations between people and with their territories but also in the historical *longue duree*.

Through his study of shopping habits in North London, Peter Jackson (University of Sheffield) showed how studies of consumption can be linked to wider social contexts such as race, family, gender and sexual roles, collective politics of place, neighbourhood transformation, etc. recognizing in them new opportunities of political engagement for the Left. For Nicky Gregson (University of Sheffield) focusing only on the capital labour relation has led progressive political economy to lose a wider scope which could incorporate a theory of culture; her research on second-hand car-boot sales is an excellent example of how consumers can introduce cultural criteria in establishing the exchange value of a commodity.

According to Andrew Sayer (Lancaster University) recent concern in cultural aspects of economic processes (as research on consumption practices and aesthetics) is leaving behind the fact that consumers, firms and sectors still operate according to the capitalist logics of cost-benefit. Sayer suggested that radical politics should use the concept of 'moral economy' (a set of norms, rights and values that men and women as citizens assert between themselves in relation with goods and services) as a way to explore the ethical bases of broader shifts in the socio-economic sphere.

Edward Soja (University of California, Los Angeles) encouraged urban and regional political economy's interaction with cultural studies, defined not as the mere addition of culture to traditional disciplinary concerns, but as the outcome of a radical restructuring of its foundations via a 'new cultural politics'. An epistemological restructuring is needed (from modernist to post-modernist critical forms of theorizing) as well as a rethinking of the traditional binary categorizations of social life (labour-capital, male-female, black white) in

order to reach a more fluid conception of subjectivity and political agency (from 'post-' to 'meta-'). For Soja, the spaces for a transformative politics can occur both in the factory and the mall, in the household and in the car-boot sale yard, within the loci of production and consumption, in both the real and imagined places of everyday life.

Problems of language and representation influenced the content of several papers. In order to clarify the confusion between the concepts of 'culture' and 'difference', Kirsten Simonsen (Roskilde University) argued that distinct national traditions of viewing culture (Anglo-American and Scandinavian, as examples) may have important implications in the articulation of regional discourses. According to Enzo Mingione (University of Padua), in a world characterized by accelerating economic globalization and changing labour markets, new explanatory categories are needed to explain the diminished role of the welfare state. Danielle Løborgne (CEPREMAP, Paris) highlighted the increasing use of new euphemisms to mask precarious labour markets in France.

Eleni Portaliou (National Technical University of Athens) appealed to the existence of a 'crisis of collective memory' in order to explain a growing alienation related to urban spaces in contemporary Greek life. In the same way, Soledad García (University of Barcelona) argued that due to the weakening of class identities and the questioning of established social and political roles, new principles of cultural citizenship have to be designed. Aristides Baltas (National Technical University of Athens) drew attention to renewed strategies needed by Marxist approaches to analyze recent political and economic changes.

For Lila Leontidou (University of the Aegean) in analyzing social and political change taking place in Europe after 1989, increasing weight has been placed on cultural and political variables over the economic ones; in this respect, the experience of Southern Europe may serve as a model for the rest of the continent. Taking the example of Greece as a semi-peripheral country, Theano Terkenli (University of the Aegean) showed the specific problems that capitalism has created in destroying old value systems and threatening existing cultural identities. Using a travel book on Spanish Morocco in the 30s written by a female Catalan novelist, Maria-Dolors Garcia-Ramon, and Abel Albet (Autonomous University of Barcelona) demonstrated the interest for incorporating a gender dimension into theories of colonial, post-colonial and orientalist discourses as well as understanding how culture erected powerful barriers between colonizers and colonized in the Spanish protectorate.

In a context of personal and national backgrounds, filters of language and vocabulary, and a different use of similar concepts, the Seminar also reflected another source of tension in the existence of a peculiar inter-generational rift: confronted by a generation of scholars with a clear commitment to a theoretically informed historical materialism, and unwilling to accept that there is 'something new' in the 'new cultural turn', a newer generation seemed to be interested in probing subjects and spaces of enquiry formerly considered taboo on the Left despite the risk of being accused of lack of political responsibility. Despite this apparent confrontation, both sides stake their research on deeply held beliefs regarding the nature of contemporary economic life and the role of progressive research in transforming structures of social and spatial inequality.

The Seminar achieved no specific conclusion, but it was clear that the debates over the 'cultural turn' in radical political economy will be lively for some time to come. Thanks to the open and high level of debate, Milos was an excellent opportunity to evaluate what has been done and to search for new ideas.