

Political Economy

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Political Economy is a critical social approach towards studying societies' structures and values concerning the production, exchange and consumption of commodities and services as well as analysing how the resulting capital is distributed. In contrast to neoclassical economists, political economists hold the view that economics cannot and should not be seen in isolation from wider social forces (e.g. political, geographical, sociological factors). Yet how this is interpreted differs across the various political economy approaches.

Marxian political economy focuses on the relational social processes that frame production and consumption. The intent of Marxian political economists is to highlight the unequal nature of the capitalist economy (see Bianchi 2011 for a discussion); in Marx' case, economic exploitation of the working class and the domination of labour by capital (leading to revolution). Yet, Marxian political economy has not been uncontested and has consequently been adapted to explain the persistence and continued stability of capitalism (regulation theory), to reduce the deterministic tendency (poststructural political economy) and to incorporate culture and nature (cultural political economy and political ecology respectively).

Regulation theory is concerned with the continued reproduction of capitalism despite the inherent tensions (between labour and capital) and contradictions (continuous growth). Regulationists thus endeavour to explain the structures of capitalist economies, which comprise the systematic organisation of production, distribution, exchange and consumption (regime of accumulation) as well as the mode of regulation (institutions, rules, social practices and norms) that ensures the stability of the process of accumulation (Cornelissen 2011). As the regime of accumulation becomes unstable over time resulting in economic crisis, stability will only be achieved with implementing regulatory fixes (e.g. a changing organisation of production and consumption and/or the creation of new institutions or practices) thus leading to a new mode of regulation. *Comparative political economists* analyse these changes in modes of regulation over time and compare the diversity of political-economic systems of governance and regulation by analysing different systems of capitalism (Webster *et al.* 2011).

A *poststructural political economy* has been developed as a response to the perceived over-determination of structure in Marxian political economy with the aim of highlighting the discursive dominance of capitalism and of presenting alternative or parallel discourses in order to create a space for agency within the structures of capitalism (Gibson-Graham 1996, 2000). As 'the economy' is both abstract and socially constructed it offers opportunities for deconstruction and for reconstructing a pluralist understanding of *economies* that is inclusive of a variety of economic

practices (Mosedale 2012). Rather than an abstract notion and a structural system that controls our actions, 'the economy' becomes constituted and shaped by our own actions.

Cultural political economy is a response to the almost exclusive focus on materiality within production and consumption processes of Marxian political economy and the relative neglect of culture as a determining factor. With the advent of the Cultural Turn in the social sciences, conceptions of the economy have changed to incorporate culture as intertwined with what is generally called the economy. Not only because cultural products are increasingly being commodified (produced, circulated and consumed) and some even determined by economic factors, but also because economic practices are embedded in the societies they occur (e.g. public holidays) and because the representation and discourse of the economy are culturally determined. A cultural political economy has emerged that recognises the importance of the cultural dimensions of the economy and politics and emphasises agency and social relations over structural determination. Of particular importance is the analysis of material transformations during the production process and the associated changing meanings of the product but also shifting meanings during consumption processes. For instance, Ateljevic and Doorne (2003) follow the production and consumption of a tie-dyed fabric from China to New Zealand in order to unveil the different meanings attributed to the product by the Chinese artisan, the tourist purchaser and the recipient of the gift and thus demonstrate the importance of the cultural context in production and consumption.

Political ecology has emerged so as to extend political economy to include nature and to engage with societies' relations with nature. As a framework of analysis, it is concerned with issues of relative power of actors *vis-à-vis* the environment (Stonich 1998) and therefore draws on political economy as one of several foundations. Recent political ecology contributions to the tourism literature (Kütting, 2010; Gössling, 2003; Cole, forthcoming) demonstrate the importance of incorporating nature into a broader understanding of political economy. Of particular interest are the following expressions of the relationships between tourism and nature: firstly, the increasing commodification of nature (e.g. eco-tourism); secondly, the determination of tourism by natural forces (e.g. climate change, natural disasters) and thirdly, the cultural representations of nature (for example for purposes of commodification).

Suggestions for further reading

Mosedale, J. (Ed.) (2011) *Political Economy of Tourism: A Critical Perspective*. Routledge

References

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