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Essays

On postmodernism and political economy by [John Hall](#) and
on using the internet by [Clifford Staples](#).

Between Postmodernism and Political Economy: Is There a Middle Kingdom?

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The word "kingdom" in my title is a sexist one that might benefit from deconstruction, but what of the kingdoms themselves? This is a puzzle for our era. Ut us take the term postmodernism to signify a blurred and hybrid array of poststructuralist, hermeneutic, and simulacratric interpretive practices in relation to a social world similarly operating on the basis of poststructuralist, hermeneutic, and simulacratric interpretive practices. The world, as Richard Harvey Brown tells us, is a text. Nevertheless, understanding the political economy of that world is as much a sociological task as it was before the various (textual, linguistic, cultural) turns. For all the textual mediation, unemployment is not just a text, and neither is Microsoft or the World Bank. Oddly, the textual turn threatens to be as totalizing and reductionist as the variant of Marxist structuralism that E. P. Thompson so trenchantly ridiculed. The one provided little way to reach culture; the other offers no way beyond it.

However, over the years that witnessed the rise of postmodern thinking, there have also been emergent indications of the need for a cultural turn in the practice of political economy itself --the work of Oliver Williamson on markets and hierarchies (which is properly critiqued as economicistic,

but at least raised the question of how economic activity is organizationally structured); Mark Granovetter on the social embeddedness of economic action; Gary Hamilton and Nicole Biggart on structures of economic institutions in East Asia; and Richard Biernacki on the cultural constitution of labor as a commodity in German and English mills during the nineteenth century.

I overdraw a conclusion from these studies: The "textual turn" is a turn that only makes sense from the perspective of theoretical practices that are non-textual, i.e., not concerned with meaningful action taken on the basis of inscribed cultural recipes. Thus, the implications of postmodernism for political economists differ according to what kind of political economist you were before postmodernism. From a Weberian perspective, I submit, the postmodern turn doesn't make much difference. Why? Two reasons.

First, methodologically, Weber did not buy into a representational" or "correspondence" approach to concept formation. Instead, he formulated a methodology of ideal types that recognizes concepts as one-sided accentualizations of reality constructed in relation to issues of cultural significance. Social meanings on the ground are constructed and in flux, not fixed. Under those conditions (which preceded postmodernism), ideal types serve as interpretive benchmarks that can be used in the analysis of sociohistorical phenomena --and in particular their cultural aspects-- without buying into an epistemology of reified representational concepts that are casualties of the poststructuralist critique.

Second, as every student of sociology is supposed to learn, Weber subscribed to a thesis of "methodological individualism." Yet the consequences of this for political economy have not been fully appreciated. Indeed, some commentators have suggested a disjuncture between Weber's methodological thesis and his comparative structuralist analyses of civilizational social formations. This view, however, can only derive from a superficial reading that fails to appreciate how agency and meaning are built into Weber's macro concepts of political economy. Weber maintained the connections between structure and agency in practice that he called for in his program. This is obvious from even a cursory perusal of *Economy and Society*, especially the chapter following the introduction, on the social organization of the economy. There, Weber offers a series of definitions --of economic action, closed and open social relationships, technical and social division of labor, expropriation of the means of production from primary producers, forms of economic organization and want satisfaction, and the organizational "environment" (as we would call it today), most importantly of both states and associational economically regulative organizations (guilds, labor unions, business associations, and so forth). What emerges from this battery of concepts is the possibility of a political economic analysis based on methodological individualism and built up from agency, historicity and institutionalization that brings the social organization of economic life into clear focus.

This approach has an affinity with postmodern concerns, in the first place, in the centrality it gives to interpretive analysis of meanings that have a discursive basis (texts), and second, in its refusal of the structuralist temptation to construct a totalized developmental theory. But a concern

with meanings does not reduce political economy to texts, at least for Weber. How did he come to a mediating solution? An *ex cathedra* answer would be of no more use in political economy than anywhere else (which unfortunately doesn't stop their proliferation).

Rather than describe an abstract position, I want to conclude by sketching three analytic implications of a Weberian political economy.

1. The old problem of "the" transition from feudalism to capitalism has to be reconstrued, since it is based on a structuralist essentialization of both feudalism and capitalism. Given Weber's ideal-type methodology, it is possible to theorize how different economic practices interpenetrate one another. Thus, much historical research reminds us that certain feudalist economic arrangements became incorporated within and subordinated to capitalist organization.

2. The theoretical underpinnings of dependency and world systems theory can be reconstructed. Among dependency theorists, Andre Gunder Frank essentialized a binary: economies had to be either feudalistic or capitalist; Latin American economies, he argued, were capitalist through and through. Extending this structuralist style of analysis, Wallerstein's world system theory locates national economies by their relation to the totality as an essentialized construct, the capitalist world system. But the colonial history of Brazil does not well fit these theorizations (Hall 1984). The forms of production in Brazil predate either European feudalism or the emergence of the modern capitalist world economy. The Portuguese move to colonize Brazil was undertaken neither by a feudal nor a capitalist state; it was an exercise in what Weber described as patrimonialism --the subordination of social and economic organization to a personal ruler, who dispenses prebends to loyal subjects. The construct of "patrimonial capitalism" offers a theoretical basis for understanding the capacity of Brazilian colonial capitalists both to maintain political power that sustained their "backward" economic position and to participate in a modern world economy without being completely subordinated by it.

3. Class analysis can be reconfigured under new intellectual conditions by drawing Marxist, Weberian and other approaches together under eclectic Weberian *aus-pices* (as the diversity of contributors to Hall, 1997, suggests). This reconfiguration depends on Weber's definition of classes in relation to markets rather than modes of production --a distinction well known since Giddens's discussion in the 1970s, which has yet to be pursued in a thoroughgoing way. Here, I can only suggest the substantial implications of this move. For one thing, it defines actors' shared class situations specifically in relation to direct market interests, which yields an analysis of pervasive, manifold and overlapping class struggles quite different than the pitched conflict of mobilized and selfconscious classes often envisioned in Marxism. On a day-in, day-out basis, class conflicts bring to the fore unlikely combatants, for example, Kansas grain farmers against petroleum interests as ethanol fuels became increasingly important. A fully developed Weberian approach also recognizes that social actors participate in diverse markets (property, labor, consumption), and it therefore resists essentializing any combination of class dimensions as a person or family's "class location."

Further, the approach acknowledged both actors' formal rationality in

relation to maximization of utilities in a market, and the infusion into the market of substantive rationality --actor's considerations of other issues, such as allegiance to family, gender, ethnic or status group, or social class. Finally, class analysis becomes strongly linked to an Weberian political economics, where it affirms that we need to look at the institutionalization of markets through issues such as how "property" and "labor" come to be defined, how regulatory organizations structure markets, and how interorganizational networks of economic organization are institutionalized.

By citing these possibilities, I do not mean to claim them as novel; they are extensions and theoretical consolidations of research developments long in the making. Nor do I discount more direct discursive approaches to class analysis (for example, in the work of Marc Steinberg). Instead, by emphasizing the socially meaningful enactments of economic arrangements, I propose a theoretical framing that bridges from texts to more conventional political economic concerns without resurrecting the problems of a now waning Marxist structuralist political economy.

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Research Resources: Using the Internet to Plan a Research Trip

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Many historical sociologists travel, sometimes long distances, to use primary sources in manuscript collections. Since there always seems to be more archival sources to explore than time, energy, and money permit, efficiency is often the key to a successful research trip. And, like most travel, the key to success is planning ahead. For archival researchers, planning has often meant identifying and studying secondary literature, identifying and locating potentially useful manuscript collections, learning as much about their content as possible, obtaining permission for access, and making appointments to visit collections. Traditionally, researchers have relied on mail, telephone, colleagues, published indices, finding aids, and registers to learn about the contents of manuscript collections. These methods have served us well, but they can be slow and expensive. Over the past six months, I have learned how to use e-mail, the World Wide

Web (www), and other Internet resources to do a quicker, cheaper, and better job of planning.

For the past six months I have been planning a second trip to England for my research on the industrial unrest that occurred in the metal trades in and around Birmingham between 1910 and 1914. Early on, I used the various "search engines" (e.g. "[Excite](#)," "InfoSeek," "Lycos," "Magellan," "[Yahoo](#),") available via either Netscape's Navigator web browser or Microsoft's Internet Explorer web browser (click "search the Internet" on the appropriate pull-down menu). I discovered that the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts (RCHM)-- the central clearinghouse for locating all non-public manuscript collections in England -- had set up its own web page (<http://www.hmc.gov.uk>). When I "went" to this web page I discovered that, with another click, I could access, and search, the RCHM's National Registry of Archives (NRA) index database.

The NRA index, which contains over 40,000 records, provides information on the nature and locations of manuscript sources for British history. Searching the NRA index for manuscript collections was similar to searching my university library catalog collection on-line.

Since I have a Telnet utility running "under" my web browser (see your local computer maven if this does not make sense), I was able to establish a direct connection to the database. From there I could search the holdings by name, subject, location, etc. Once I identified a manuscript collection it was time to make use of the Internet feature everyone loves most --e-mail. At present, the NRA database provides only the "snail-mail" address for the library or archive where the manuscript collection is located. Someday soon, e-mail addresses --and perhaps even a hypertext link-- will be available. Yet, at present this was no obstacle to combining the use of this database with e-mail follow-up.

I hoped to find the papers of Julia Varley (1871-1952), suffragist and organizer for the Workers' Union, and a key player in the "great unrest" of 1913. I searched the NRA database by her name and learned that her papers were housed at the Brynmor Jones Library at the University of Hull (NRA 20511 Varley). Instead of writing a letter to the archivists at Hull to learn more about the collection, I searched the internet for the University of Hull homepage, found it (<http://www.hull.ac.uk/homepage.html>), and in short order had the e-mail address for Ms. Lynda Crawford, an archivist at the Brynmor Jones Library. Thanks to the helpful Ms Crawford, through a series of e-mail exchanges -- sometimes occurring within hours --- I learned much about Julia Varley and the contents of her manuscript collection at Hull. And, also via e-mail, I reserved a room for my wife and I when we visit Hull in a few months.

I have repeated the scenario above many times in preparation for this trip. On occasion, when an archive, such as the Communist Party of Great Britain Library, seems not (yet?) to have established a Web page, I have had to jump off-line to use snail-mail. This happens more often with the smaller, local archives, but soon any organization with a phone will have a web page, so I expect when planning future trips to be buying even fewer stamps.

Everything I have done to prepare for this trip probably could have been done via snail mail, the telephone, a research assistant, or by planning a much longer research trip. But these alternatives require more money, energy and time than I or most people have at their disposal. Thus, I am prepared for this trip in ways that would have been impossible without the Internet. Perhaps others might better prepare themselves for their research trips by using the Internet in such, and other, ways as I have described above.

