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Book Review

Romanticism, Economics and the Question of 'Culture' by Philip Connell. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Reviewed by

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“When the significance of poverty was realised”, writes Karl Polanyi in *The Great Transformation*, “the stage was set for the nineteenth century.” (2001, 116) Indeed, the transformation from the “Age of Rights” (Dagger 1989, 301) of the late 18th century – exemplified by *Declaration of Independence* in 1776 in the United States and *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of Citizens* in 1789 in France – into, in the words of Hegel, the “bürgerliche Gesellschaft” of the 19th century brought social problems to the forefront of politics as well as of theory. A society of equals by rights necessarily laid bare the existing inequalities in wealth, birth and education. As Lorenz von Stein argued in 1850, the development of the constitutional state and thus of human rights was bound to change the very nature of society and state into one dominated and legitimized by social demands and their satisfaction. (See, e.g., 1959, vol. 3, 335-338) It is thus not a coincidence that the ideas of culture and education evolve out of this socio-political context as counterparts to rights.

The traditional view holds that the British Romantic literary tradition played crucial role in developing a largely conservative idea of culture (see summary of these arguments in this book 276-284). As, e.g., E. P. Thompson argues, most of the British education movements of the early 19th century – mutual improvement societies, mechanics institutes, Sunday lectures etc – left “the customary experiential culture of the people” behind (1997, 19); that is: they were ideologically biased. It is arguable, however, that the same is true for the view of Romanticism as an opposition to liberal ideology, “identified above all with the reductive, calculating rationality of utilitarianism and economic science.” (vii) The book under review, originally a doctoral thesis at the University of

Cambridge, sets out to “reassess the political context of British Romanticism”.
(vii)

The book demonstrates a complicated web of theoretical, political and economical notions behind the Lake school poets (notably Wordsworth and Coleridge) as well as political economists (e.g. Bentham, Malthus). Based on meticulous and original research, the author shows, for example, in fascinating detail how Malthus’s ideas on the size of population, problems of poverty, and educating the poor as a solution melt into the poetry of Wordsworth (Chapter 1). A brilliant example of the writing and research is following sentence: “It seems more likely that Wordsworth’s declaration of the ‘utter hollowness’ of the ‘wealth of Nations’, and determination to discover ‘where alone that wealth / Is lodged, and how increased’, takes its lead from Malthus’s own extensive critique of Smith in the *Essay on Population*.” (60) The long campaign of Romantic poets against the unfeeling economic science of Smith and his followers uses the critique and tools of one of the representatives of the very same economic science, namely Malthus.

The following chapters discuss education and economics (e.g. Dugald Stewart, William Roscoe, and Samuel Baily), the role of conservative educational discourse in Romantic poetry, the counter-revolutionary debates and the influence of political discussions around the Poor Laws on the relations between Romantic poetry and economic science. All of the chapters show signs of brilliance not unlike the one quoted above. In sum, however, the reader is left with handful of such brilliant thoughts and very good research, but without a story. The book does not really have a tale to tell; it rather amasses aspects upon aspects from the Romantic tradition and its relation to economic science.

Perhaps the most disturbing characteristic of the book is its style. As the book is written partly as intellectual history, partly as literary criticism, there are no vivid characters drawn, only thoughts painstakingly contextualized. This, in turn, leads to an excessive use of generalizations and “-isms” in order to characterize thoughts and their origins or possible influences upon them and emanating from them. At times, this renders the text rather awkward:

The Malthusian argument for popular education was, however, by no means straightforwardly identifiable with the radical reform platform. Indeed, this was one of its principal recommendations to reformist Whigs such as Whitbread, who had found themselves politically isolated by the triumph of counter-revolutionary Pittite loyalism, and who failed to realize the degree to which, by appearing to compromise their allegiance to the more radical elements of the Foxite legacy, they risked forfeiting their leadership of a renascent popular reform movement. Whitbread’s

proposals could hardly be ascribed as informed by the kind of 'utopian' educational ideal that conservative pedagogues attacked as 'injurious and absurd'. (131-132)

This is just a random pick from the book; none of the generalizations and "-isms" in it were introduced previously nor are they explained afterwards. In such cases, there is no possibility for the reader to understand what the author actually tries to say. The book that reportedly wants to free the Romantics as well as economic science from ideological lenses casts the various actors through these very lenses. This turns parts of the book into silent monologue.

Yet, even if one understands what is meant, there is no synthesis apparent. It might have been advisable to let the book evolve around one or two systematic issues. This is especially so as the book unwillingly touches upon at least one such issue: what is and should be the nature and role of knowledge in industrial society? All discussions in the book turn around this topic: what should be the nature of knowledge, given via education and culture, that would ensure a society developing simultaneously in economical *and* social terms? The author never addresses this question directly, i.e., he is apparently not aware of the systematic problem in front of him. All economic systems, and particularly the market economy, depend on human knowledge. In that sense, all economies are knowledge-based. The author quotes from the prospectus of the Manchester Mechanics' Institute, established in 1824, proclaiming the benefits of science to the artisan, by allowing them to gain "a more thorough knowledge of their business, acquire greater degree of skill in the practice of it, and be qualified to make improvement and even new inventions in the arts which they respectively profess." (77) This could have been also written in 2004 in some policy document of most developed and developing countries, in particular in the European Union. The problems addressed are the same: the Capitalist economy, as Schumpeter has said, develops via the process of creative destruction (1962, 81-86), creating new possibilities for development and gain which along the way destroy existing economic and social structures. (Think of factories and urbanization in the 19th century, or of internet and loss of distance in the late 20th century!) This makes (re-) learning an essential part of the development and thus ties economic, social and political interests intimately together. This is why there are so many mutual influences between Romanticism, political economy and politics: it is determined by the nature of question they all discussed.

The book ends in the 1830's. However, this period, but particularly the 1840's, saw for the first time in history "a very strong growth in the belief in the merits of laissez-faire capitalism." (Reinert forthcoming) The book does not need to discuss the parallels of that belief with the Washington Consensus of the 1990's and its catastrophic aftermath in the developing countries; nothing,

however, appries the reader that in a matter of years economics will have become a value-system of its own, detached from education, culture and social problems (see on quantification in economics Drechsler 2000). It is this period that economy is seen by the economists no longer as embedded in social and political affairs of a society. Mainstream economics is up to this day unable to deal with problems of development. The roots of this kind of economics lie, however, precisely in the period and in the discussions treated in this book.

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