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On Cultural Political Economy: A Defence and Constructive Critique

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the relationship between economic and political realms by reference to the Marxist conception of the economy as the 'motor of history'. The discussion is framed through a recent debate around Cultural Political Economy (CPE) and its efforts to keep Marx's materialist premises without falling into economic reductionism, or 'bend the stick too far' into the opposite direction and fall into 'constructivism'. Despite the efforts to avoid said extremes, CPE have been criticised for being both reductionist and constructivist. This piece will defend CPE against the above charges while also highlighting some unresolved tensions within the method. I will then propose ways to resolve said tensions as well as providing the means of extending the scope of CPE to deal with political issues going beyond the economic realm, without losing sight of their connections to regimes of accumulations and resulting material needs and grievances of various groups. I will argue that this further development is necessary to analyse an increasingly unpredictable political landscape where tribal enmities and xenophobic feelings are returning to mainstream politics.



KEYWORDS

Cultural political economy; Marxist theory; economic determinism; imaginary; class struggle; material interests

Introduction

One of the key questions political economy investigates is the relationship between what we might call 'politics' and 'economics'. As the name itself suggests, one key methodological premise is that the two must be studied together. Nevertheless, various schools of thoughts understand this relationship differently. According to Marx's materialism, economic logics are 'the motor of history' as they are said to determine politics as well as virtually every other aspect of social life (philosophy, culture, art, etc.). What exactly Marx meant when he talked about 'determination' is a question that is yet to be settled. A key issue for the Marxist tradition has been that of conceiving this 'determination' in a manner that does not reduce all politics to economics (thus making the distinction between the two useless). Thinkers who are said to overemphasise the economic moment have been called vulgar materialists, economic reductionists or structuralists. On the other hand, those who tried to escape said reductionism were then accused of being constructivists, voluntarists, or even idealists.

While many advances have been made within political economy, this problem remains central within Marxist theory, and the same sort of criticisms are still been made against its various versions. Today, one of the most ambitious efforts at creating a Marxian political economy is undeniably Jessop's and Sum's Cultural Political Economy (CPE), which seeks to elaborate a 'post-disciplinary' (Jessop and Sum 2001, p. 90) approach to social analysis interlinking economics, culture and politics.

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Despite its efforts, the method has been criticised for both being ‘too structuralist’ and ‘too constructivist’ by two authors (van Heur and Staricco respectively) within this very journal.

This paper has three main aims and is accordingly divided into three sections. First, to defend CPE against the above criticisms. Second, to show that, while I disagree the ‘specifics’ of van Heur’s and Staricco’s arguments, some unresolved tensions between structuralism and constructivism can be found within Sum’s and Jessop’s discussion of subjunctivisation, class and interest. The third aim is to propose ways in which said tensions can be resolved by further developing CPE’s concept of imaginary. This is a ‘constructive critique’ insofar as I will try to resolve the highlighted issues while presenting notions which might help extending CPE’s scope. Indeed, while I do not think CPE is necessarily a reductionist method (as van Heur would claim), the concepts presented need further development to be able to deal with policies that go beyond (or are even in contradiction with) the general process of surplus accumulation. I will try to show how this can be done without losing tracks of class struggle and the process of surplus accumulation so aptly described by Jessop and Sum. Indeed, *the results of said process should always be conceived as pre-conditions* determining the various economic grievances and needs groups have. Those needs are then addressed and explained in various ways and might lead groups to support the most vicious ideologies in the hope they will be met. Understanding the relationship between material needs and theoretical elaborations is a particularly important task today as we witness the return of far-right ideas and state policy which cannot be explained simply by appeal to capitalist accumulation and bourgeois economic interests. The concepts I will propose will help us making sense of said shifts while also integrating them into a Marxist economic analysis.

The CPE Debate: A Defence of CPE

We will begin by discussing and assessing van Heur’s critique of CPE. For the sake of brevity and fidelity to the text, we will quote his own summary of the criticisms:

- (1) ‘Jessop’s distinction between the semiotic and extra-semiotic dimensions of social life is not merely a formal distinction, but dependent on substantive social theory (...). This unavoidably downplays the proliferation of cultural practices that are irreducible to this particular materiality.
- (2) The argument that capitalism tends to ecological dominance is problematic. (...)
- (3) By consistently privileging two lower-level parts within much more complex and widely variable configurations of higher-level entities, Jessop tendentially misrepresents the emergent dimensions of these entities.
- (4) The current version of cultural political economy has problematic political consequences, since it leads to a potential blindness to the emergence of progressive practices.’ (Van Heur 2010a, pp. 439–440)

The overall thrust of van Heur’s argument is that CPE is guilty of ‘too much materialism’ and does not pay enough attention to other (independent) social practices/relations and their transformative role. For example, he criticises CPE’s analysis of the ‘knowledge-based economy’ and its relationship to capitalist accumulation: ‘By arguing that state regulation is concerned with the creation of a knowledge-based economy’ CPE ‘theoretically tends to prejudge the outcome of what are currently highly contested and politicised struggles’ (Van Heur 2010a, p. 434). This issue springs from CPE’s ‘regulationist assumption that one can relate particular events or phenomena to a broader accumulation regime and mode of regulation’. This amounts to some kind of ‘functional explanation’ (Van Heur 2010a, p. 434). Within this context (Van Heur 2010a, p. 435), van Heur quotes Purcell’s critique of regulation theorists when dealing with the relationship between accumulation regimes and state-restructuring. Purcell argues that that regulationist theorists’ ‘analysis of the state focuses too narrowly on its role in economic regulation and overlooks other imperatives (...). This more expansive

account would require giving methodological attention to how the state is also crucially concerned with the relations between state and citizen.’ (Purcell 2002, p. 292).

In their reply, Sum and Jessop explain that their method entails an analysis of ‘positive or negative synergetic interactions among sets of social relations within the same stratum – generating properties not attributable to one set alone’ (Jessop and Sum 2010, p. 447). In other words, their materialism presents generic abstractions which allow them to analyse the relationship between underlying economic, legal relations and emerging social practices without reducing the latter to the former. Thus, van Heur misinterprets their approach because he ‘treats rational abstractions (...) as if they were comprehensive descriptions of really existing mechanisms, tendencies, counter-tendencies, liabilities, and so on’. (Jessop and Sum 2010, p. 447). They also reject accusations of functionalism, arguing that van Heur’s notion of capital as a ‘as the demi-urge of societal development’, is based on a ‘selective reading’ of their work. This interpretation ‘contradicts the basic logic of complexity reduction through meaning making that led us to highlight the role of different kinds of imaginary’ (Jessop and Sum 2010, p. 449).

In his response to Jessop’s and Sum’s rebuttal, van Heur sticks to his guns, and further develops his criticisms. First, he argues that Jessop and Sum misrepresent his criticism concerning CPE’s ‘rational abstractions’. The issue is not that they ‘involve no comprehensive descriptions’, but that they privilege ‘accumulation and regulation in the analysis of concrete knowledge-based economies without’ paying ‘attention to the specific organisation and dynamic of the phenomenon under investigation’ (Van Heur 2010b, p. 454). To illustrate this, he discusses Sum’s analysis of the World Economic Forum’s role in producing logics of competitiveness which are then adopted by various nation states (Sum 2009). Van Heur argues that while Sum’s article ‘briefly acknowledges the heterogeneous motives of actors’ it ‘hardly provides any empirical evidence that would allow us to grasp the ways in which these sites actually have become more competitive or how the very notion of competitiveness is shaped by the variety of motives at work in particular locations. Causal relations are posited, but not investigated’ (Van Heur 2010b, p. 455). Van Heur sees the origins of this one-sidedness in CPE’s notion of accumulation regime as its central ‘rational abstraction’. This is something he also hints at in his previous article when he quotes (Van Heur 2010a, p. 433) Sayer’s cautionary remarks on the ‘misattribution of causality’ (Sayer 2000, p. 7). Due to the methodological emphasis on accumulation, CPE links other phenomena (e.g. ‘economic imaginaries’) to it in an ‘unnecessarily reductionist manner’ (Van Heur 2010b, p. 454). Consequentially, it downplays other processes and structures. Furthermore, due its inability to analyse specific relations and practices in depth, ‘Jessop and Sum largely ignore the strategic and phenomenon-dependent nature of theory construction, which exacerbates the difficulty of bridging the gap between theory and practice’ (Van Heur 2010b, p. 455). This is seen as having negative repercussions on CPE’s employment for empirical research, as well as its contribution to political action. Finally, van Heur rejects CPE’s attempt to create an over-reaching framework, as he argues that ‘the types of abstraction as well as theories developed will depend on the phenomenon under investigation and the kind of political change envisioned’ (Van Heur 2010b, p. 456). In other words, theories should be picked based on the object of study.

While I agree with van Heur’s overall argument that CPE’s framework can lead to an overemphasis on capitalist accumulation at the expenses of other social phenomena, I disagree with the ‘specifics’ of his criticisms, as I do not believe this issue results from the ‘abstractions’ involved. Van Heur argues that the use of certain abstractions leads to a misattribution of causality. This appears to be supported by Sayer’s remarks. However, this misleading, as the passage quoted by van Heur, has nothing to do with Sayer’s analysis of abstractions, but refers to his reservations towards post-modern theory (Sayer 2000, p. 7). The misattribution of causation is an issue relating to how concepts are applied rather than to the soundness of the concepts themselves. A sound concept might be applied to construct inexistent casual relations. This is an issue with its ‘operationalisation’ rather than its ‘rationality’. Indeed, Sayer’s distinction between ‘rational’ and ‘chaotic’ abstractions does not concern causation, but rather the attribution of arbitrary relationships within definitions:

'A bad abstraction or 'chaotic conception' is one which is based upon a non-necessary relationship, or which divides the indivisible by failing to recognise a necessary relationship.' (Sayer 1981, p. 9)

In my view, 'accumulation regimes' is a rational abstraction that is necessary to understand the development of capitalist economies and their respective states. Van Heur's criticism of Sum's work as an example of 'positing casual relationships' without investigation, also appears to me unfair. Nowhere in the text does Sum talk of 'causation'. She rather proposes a historic study of the development of 'competitiveness', first as a 'theoretical paradigm', then as 'a policy paradigm', and finally as a 'management/consultancy knowledge and knowledge brand' (Sum 2009, p. 187). Indeed, Sum explicitly denies top-down causation when discussing how this paradigm has been employed by various institutions: 'Any coherence (...) is the product of contingent convergence, structural coupling and skilful recontextualization rather than attributable to a single, top-down, global neoliberal project, let alone to a neoliberal "conspiracy"' (Sum 2009, pp. 187–188). While it is true that Sum neglects each state's motivations for embracing the paradigm of 'competitiveness', her article is entitled 'the production of hegemonic policy discourses' rather than 'the acceptance of hegemonic policy discourses by nation states'. Thus, the framework employed fits the phenomena discussed, even though (as with all studies) it leaves out other connected issues.

I think Purcell's comments on regulation theory better capture the origins of CPE's economic determinism:

'The overriding goal of regulation theory (as well as much of political economy more generally) is to explain how capitalist accumulation endures despite its internal contradictions. Those elements of society that are not primarily economic, such as the state, are analysed primarily with respect to this foundational question. Thus, the economy is privileged methodologically, even if most authors do not grant it theoretical primacy. The incomplete account of the state and state restructuring in the literature is the result of what I call a *methodological constriction* rather than a theoretical reduction.' (Purcell 2002, pp. 285–286)

In other words, the issue is not that regulation theory is inherently reductionist due to its methodological assumptions, the problem rather lays in the school's methodological focus, which leads its thinkers 'to underdevelop the extent to which state actors also operate according to a more political logic in which the needs of the economy are not necessarily primary' (Purcell 2002, p. 286). Van Heur's quoting of Purcell is misleading as Purcell does not criticise the regulation school's abstractions, he criticises the school for not presenting further concepts which would lead to a broader analysis of the state.

Two final criticisms remain. First, van Heur argues that different phenomena require different theories, and so CPE is not useful insofar as it is a theory which is supposed to explain different phenomena across different realms of society in their interconnections. In other words, CPE lacks the specificity necessary for empirical analysis. Thus, CPE is attacked not for what it offers, but rather for what it 'leaves out'. Yet, Jessop and Sum themselves point out that 'specific explananda require different kinds of theoretical approach and it is improbable, in a complex and open world that is far from being a fully constituted totality, that the corresponding entry-points and standpoints could eventually be synthesised into a single general theory of everything' (Jessop and Sum 2016). Van Heur attacks CPE for proposing a theory which seeks to explain everything but can explain nothing due to its inability to deal with specific phenomena. However, CPE's was not designed to explain specific phenomena in depth, and so CPE should be assessed on the grounds of how well it manages to spell out the interconnections and processes it presents through its framework. Indeed, my problem with CPE is that some of the concepts necessary to analyse the relationship between economics and politics (things within its methodological focus) are not explained in enough depth. My position is similar to Purcell's in this regard. While I have no problem with CPE's general methodological assumptions, some of its analytical tools needs further development.

The second critique of CPE appearing in this journal is advanced by Staricco, who attacks CPE for being 'too culturalist/constructivist'. Staricco criticises CPE for granting 'equal ontological status to semiosis and social structures' (Staricco 2017, p. 333). Somehow inconsistently, later in the text

Staricco reads CPE as actually giving ontological priority to culture and semiosis (that is sense and meaning making): ‘Materiality and extra-semiotic elements (...) are only taken into account as long as they contribute to the examination of semiotic practices, but do not seem of relevance as objects of study in their own’ (Staricco 2017, p. 334). The capitalist mode of production is ‘only included in the analysis as a constraining variable’. This position denies ‘the fact that social relations of production and their inherent contradictions, regimes of accumulation (and their effective coupling with modes of regulation) and crises exist independently of the will of actors, their interpretation and symbolic constructions’ (Staricco 2017, p. 334). Instead, Staricco suggests that CPE’s ‘ontological cultural turn should be restricted to one dimension of social life (that of discourses and their articulation, meaning-making and struggles for hegemony) while recognising the objectivity of social structures and relations that do not need to be (re)signified in order to have consequences and produce effects’ (Staricco 2017, p. 336). The rest of the paper is then devoted to an appraisal of key concepts proposed by the so-called Amsterdam School (Staricco 2017, pp. 336–339), whose approach could be developed to construct the type of theory Staricco has in mind.

As this article is mostly concerned with CPE and its critics, we will not address the discussion surrounding the relationship between CPE and the Amsterdam School (Jessop and Sum 2017, pp. 347–352), but simply focus on Sum’s and Jessop’s reply to Staricco’s criticisms against their methodology:

‘For us, starting with semiosis is no more, but no less, than a contingent epistemic choice between two options and does not entail a fixed ontological ordering. This error is compounded by Staricco’s recurrent (but not fully consistent) equation of semiosis with the symbolic or cultural and by his neglect of our dialectically informed comments on the material dimensions of semiosis as well as the semiotic aspects of materiality. (...) The equal ontological status accorded to semiosis and structuration entails alternative but complementary approaches to analysing their co-constitutive role in different contexts’. (Jessop and Sum 2017, p. 345)

In other words, Sum and Jessop do not give priority either to the ‘material’ or ‘semiotic’ aspects of social reality, each ‘side’ of reality might be used as a starting point. However, eventually, we must confront and study its connections to ‘the other side’ (Sum and Jessop 2013, p. 187).

It appears to me that Staricco is trapped within the framework of what Holloway calls ‘scientific Marxism’. This trend assumes that ‘society develops according to objective laws’ and ‘there is an objective movement of history which is independent of human volition’. This separation between objective structures and human will, then leads to ‘an endless debate between determinism and voluntarism, between those who attribute little importance to subjective intervention and those who see it as crucial’ (Holloway 2005, p. 126). If we consider Staricco’s criticisms and suggestions it appears clear that Staricco is proposing (whether consciously or not) this kind of scientific/structuralist Marxism. Indeed, Staricco attacks CPE for assuming that social structures (specifically capitalist accumulation and its contradictions) depend on human will (which, from a structuralist perspective, is to sin of ‘voluntarism’).

Now, my question for Staricco would be whether he can provide at least one example of a social structure reproducing itself without the aid of human will, language and meaning making. A ‘social structure’ is simply a tool created to conceptualise the rules, demands, incentives, opportunities and constrictions human beings encounter in their practical lives. However, for such structures to exist, human beings must accept them and act on their own volition to reproduce them. The reproduction of social structures depends on people’s interpretation and understanding of the rules of conduct they encounter, while the existence of said rules is only possible due to other individuals’ efforts to assert them, which in turn presupposes said individuals understand them, and so on.

Staricco assumes that human will, discourse, meaning, symbols etc, are only necessary components of certain ‘realms of social reality’, while the economy is somehow something that independently asserts itself. While I understand that some general economic logics such as surplus accumulation are due to repeat themselves due to the necessities dictated by the capitalist relations of production, that does not mean that they reproduce themselves ‘on their own’ without any agential or symbolic aid. Staricco criticises CPE because it conceives social structures only in terms of

'constraints' to agency. Yet, this is the correct way of conceptualising them if we want to explain how individuals and groups react in different ways under similar structural conditions (something a non-reductionist theory must try to account for). Without understanding the dialectic between agency and structures, we cannot explain how certain general imperatives (e.g. surplus accumulation) take different forms under specific circumstances. Taking the agency/structure problem seriously is necessary to understand capitalism's peculiar developments across different spaces and times. As Sum and Jessop put it:

'Given the open nature of capitalism's overall dynamic, each accumulation regime and/or mode of regulation imparts its own distinctive structure and dynamic to the circuit of capital – including distinctive forms of crisis and breakdown. This in turn requires any analysis of the improbable nature of capital accumulation to take agency seriously. (Sum and Jessop 2013, p. 182)'

If we were to follow Staricco's suggestion, our analysis of capitalism would not go much deeper than the reproduction of the M–C–M circuit (one of the most abstract and thus universal features of capitalist relations of production which reproduces itself under all circumstances).

So how is it possible for me to argue that CPE sometimes 'goes too materialist' and other times is 'too constructivist' after defending it against those very same criticisms? As I will show in the next sections, different aspects of the theory tend towards one side or the other. I suggest CPE's 'economism' springs from the way in which Jessop and Sum conceptualize the notion of imaginary. CPE's underdevelopment of the concept of imaginary as well as its relationship to broader politics and state action, leads them to overemphasise the economic moment without providing the means to link it to broader political issues. Perhaps as a consequence of that, CPE has been mostly employed to discuss the relationship between economic policy and discourse (in the form of the 'imaginary'), whereby the former is seen as functional to capitalist accumulation, and the latter is conceived as its justification. Due to its focus, the relationship between economic phenomena and 'broader' political issues is not fully developed. While I do not believe CPE to be a 'reductionist' methodology, I think its scope has been so far limited to the relationship between the state and the sort of economic policy which can be explained by reference to logics of surplus accumulation (e.g. neo-liberal economic policies).

Furthermore, I will show that the notion of imaginary conflates the mental habits necessary for the individual's 'navigation' through the social relations and practices she/he encounters (which to some extent vary depending geographical locations and position within the social division of labour) with the more 'abstract' and speculative notions regarding society and its functioning. Because of this CPE overemphasises the way in which individuals are 'constituted' as subject by dominant discourse through the aid of 'technologies', leading to a somehow structuralist conceptualisation of the individual/surroundings relationship which is at odds with their analysis of agency and structure, as well as with their more constructivist claims in relation to class struggle and politics. Indeed, when theorising the relationship between class struggle, the formation of identities and their relationship to politics, CPE seems to bend the stick towards constructivism. I believe CPE downplays the role played by material interests and needs which are (in some sense) prior to individuals' 'constitution' as political subjects. This aspect of Jessop and Sum's project is underdeveloped, and some inconsistencies can be found in their theoretical statements. As I will try to show, said statements contradicts some observations within their empirical work (which, as I argued above, emphasises economic analysis).

Between Scylla and Charybdis: Subjectivation, Interests and Class

As we stated in the introduction, CPE tries to account for the power of economic structures without falling into economic reductionism, while considering the power of discourse and meaning-making without falling into constructivism. Those two 'extremes' are dubbed by reference to Greek Mythology as (the structuralist) Scylla and (the constructivist) Charybdis (Sum and Jessop 2013, p. 22). To do

this, CPE combines concepts taken from Marxist political economy, Gramscian vernacular materialism, and Foucault's insights into disciplinary power. This combination is justified on the grounds that while Marx can explain *why* social structures take their peculiar forms due to underlying economic imperatives, Foucault is able to explain *how* such relations shape individuals' behaviour through mechanisms of control. Gramsci is then interpreted as providing the conceptual apparatus linking the two (Sum and Jessop 2013, p. 207). Through this synthesis, they articulate what they call a 'grand-theory' (Sum and Jessop 2013, p. 99). I think CPE is largely successful in its synthesis, mostly managing to avoid the two extremes above. This is particularly the case in their discussion of the relationship between semiosis and structuration (Sum and Jessop 2013, pp. 184–187). CPE wants to avoid the crude reductionism (implicit in some variant of Marxist theory) whereby 'political and ideological positions' are conceived as 'epiphenomena of objective economic class location' (Sum and Jessop 2013, p. 188).

While I agree with their critique of this type of Marxism, some 'structuralist residues' can be found in their discussion of 'subjectivation'. There is a tension in the discussion of the 'four selectivities' (Sum and Jessop 2013, pp. 214–219). While Sum and Jessop do an excellent job at reconstructing the relationship between agency and structures in a defensible manner, the overall analysis seems to be at odds with the Foucauldian notion of 'subjectivation'. Subjectivation is described as the manner in which individuals are 'constituted as subjects'. This involves not only the creation of subject positions but also of 'willing' subjects, that is, 'subjects who are willing and able to play their allotted roles'. This is linked to 'technologies of the self', that is, 'the diverse practices involved in self- subjectivation and self- responsabilization' (Sum and Jessop 2013, p. 112). The issue is that, while Sum and Jessop reject the orthodox Marxist assumption that individuals' way of thinking and behaviour is already pre-determined by their class-position, they argue that such position is nevertheless imposed on them through discourse (what they call discursive 'selectivities') and disciplinary powers operating through technology (what they call 'technological selectivities'). In my view, the notion of subjectivisation involves a passive notion of individuals, who do not have much control over who they are and how they think. This appears to me as a residue of structuralism that is to be found in Foucault and has its origins in Althusser's theory of ideology through 'hailing' whereby "ideology" 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way as to 'recruit' subjects among individuals (it recruits them all) or 'transforms' individuals into subjects' (Althusser 2014, p. 188).

To their credit, Sum and Jessop acknowledge that this power might be resisted (Sum and Jessop 2013, p. 213). Nevertheless, when they describe capillary power (one aspect of this process of subjectivation) as 'power that stretches into the smallest and most private aspects of life' (Sum and Jessop 2013, p. 209), they seem to suggest inescapability and passivity from the individual perspective. Furthermore, while they argue that 'subjectivities are plural and changeable' (Sum and Jessop 2013, p. 118) and that individuals have 'plural identities' 'occupying several subjects', they also emphasise that such individuals should not be conceived as 'rational' and 'centred individuals' but rather as 'as being formed through subjectivation' (Sum and Jessop 2013, p. 115). This suggests that, despite the plurality, individuals have no saying in what identity they choose. Dominant powers choose for them. Indeed, discursive selectivities are said to be so powerful as to limit 'what can be imagined' (Sum and Jessop 2013, p. 215), while technological selectivities 'produce subject positions that contribute towards the making of dispositives and truth regimes' (Sum and Jessop 2013, p. 216). In my view, this side of CPE (despite its rejection of orthodox Marxism) leads to a structuralist theory of subject construction whereby individuals are moulded into accepting their position along with its corresponding 'ideas'.

Overall, the problem can be stated in this manner: Are individuals completely constituted as subjects by dominant powers? If not, (as CPE seems to claim) to what extent can they resist this from an individual perspective? The power of discursive and technological selectivities in constituting subjects as 'willing', is at odds with the subsequent discussion of agential selectivities and 'counter-hegemonies'. If individuals are constituted as willing subjects, disciplined to accept their position as well embracing dominant discourses, how can they 'make a difference' (Sum and Jessop 2013,

p. 217) by altering and subverting the surrounding social structures? While I agree with the idea that the amount of power and freedom agents hold are determined by their position within the social division of labour, the notion of subjectivation overstates the power discursive and technological selectivities have on their minds and sense of identity.

One way of postulating the relationship between structural position and ways of thinking in a less-deterministic manner is to distinguish ideas which are necessary from a practical perspective (e.g. I need knowledge of boilers to fix them) with speculation and contemplation. Then we can say that structural position 'leads the individual to encounter certain objects, social practices, ideas, and contradictions instead of others' and that it 'makes the cognitive engagement with certain objects, practices and ideas necessary' (Sau 2020, p. 123). In other words, there are indeed some ideas which individuals must grasp in order to be able to deal with their surroundings, this includes things such as understanding and complying with rules and values, understanding one's position (that is one's 'identity') within said 'field' (in a Bourdieuan sense), as well as having the technical knowledge necessary for one's role within the division of labour. However, when it comes to contemplation, we should reject Foucault and listen to Gramsci when he says that *everyone is a philosopher*:

'Every individual carries on some intellectual activity: he is a philosopher, he shares a conception of the world and therefore contributes to sustain it or modify it, that is, to create new conceptions'. (Gramsci 2011, p. 2, 215/ Gramsci 2014, p. 1, 488)

Individuals are philosophers in the sense that, regardless of their structural position, they can think critically and make all sorts of abstract connections regarding the objects and relations surrounding them. No 'discursive selectivity' can truly numb this power. This means that *individuals' consent towards their surrounding social structures does not mean an embrace of said structures on an abstract and contemplative level. Individuals must acquire the cognitive means to deal with their environment, and they must comply with its rules out of (a perceived) necessity. This does not entail that they must also embrace said structures and rules on a conceptual level, without reservation and criticism.* In my view, it is precisely from the freedom of thought inherent in all individuals that the seeds for change are born.

Having discussed the 'structuralism' implicit in the notion of subjectivation, let us now turn to the constructivist Charybdis of class struggle and interest articulation. Due to CPE's rejection of orthodox Marxism, class struggle is seen as a being determined discursively rather than structurally: 'class struggle is first of all a struggle about the constitution of class subjects before it is a struggle between class subjects' (Sum and Jessop 2013, p. 187). Indeed, Sum and Jessop argue that 'class interests can no longer be seen as permanently and exclusively inscribed in the relations of production' (Sum and Jessop 2013, p. 190). Instead, 'CPE highlights the role of discourses and practices in establishing a contingent equivalence among members of different social classes and/or categories that privileges one identity and its associated interests over other identities' (Sum and Jessop 2013, p. 188). Thus, 'CPE does not assume that class identities (...) actually correspond to objective class location or objective interests in a given spatio-temporal horizon. What matters for capital accumulation or political class domination is the 'class relevance' of social identities, imaginaries and projects' (Sum and Jessop 2013, p. 190).

There is however a problem here. It appears that interests entirely depend on discursive articulation and must therefore vary depending on the specific conjunctures. Nevertheless, Jessop and Sum still talk about 'objective interests', a notion tied with the sort of orthodox Marxism they reject. In other words, if interests are discursively articulated (and therefore, always changing), then the notion of an objective interest should also be rejected. Instead, Sum and Jessop goes as far as to say that identifying such objective interests is one of CPE's aims (Sum and Jessop 2013, p. 190). Indeed, while rejecting the notion that objective interests emerge from class position, CPE employs a notion of objective interests which result from the 'formation of subjectivities' (Sum and Jessop 2013, p. 190). One might see the tension between an emphasis on constructivism

accompanied by residues from orthodox Marxism. I believe that the notion of objective interest should be rejected as it assumes that intellectuals can figure out what people's 'true' interests are. Within the Marxist tradition, this notion has often been associated with the controversial concept of 'false consciousness'.

As Jessop rightly argues, 'interests must be related to structural constraints and conjunctural opportunities in given circumstances and to potential trade-offs among different sets of interests across different spatiotemporal horizons' (Jessop 2016, p. 93). I also agree that one must focus on finding the 'class relevance' of 'distinct forms of polity, politics, and policy' rather than reducing politics to levels of 'class consciousness' (Jessop 2016, p. 97). Nevertheless, CPE's notion of class struggle as a struggle in discursively constituting individuals as class subjects' bends the stick too far towards constructivism. While it is true that individuals' political orientation and interests do not come 'ready-made' depending on their position, my understanding of class struggle points towards a structural feature of capitalism that exists irrespectively of what people 'make of it': *Class struggle refers to the inherent conflict of material interests between capitalists and wage workers, whereby the capitalist has a material incentive towards reducing wages (to increase profit), while the worker (for obvious reason) tends to resist this reduction.* Now, while I agree that class struggle in its more 'overt forms' (e.g. organised collective action) depends on whether workers identify with one another, which is (as CPE argues) contingent on discursive articulations, this general conflict of interests is 'prior' to such articulations and alliances, and is perceived by most people even though they might not interpret it as a 'class problem'. Furthermore, while no political unity comes from class position, the needs and problems experienced by different groups will (to some extent) depend on their position within the social division of labour (e.g. less demand for coffee might mean redundancy or wage reductions for those working in the industry), regardless of what exactly they make of them on a conceptual level. In other words, while class alliances and their broader political affiliations depend on discourse, class position still determines the sort of problems people encounter in their every-day lives, their specific needs and grievances. Indeed, CPE's empirical work contradicts its theoretical understanding of class identity in wholly constructivist terms when making statements such as 'parents and working-class families are finding it hard with rising inflation, high rent and low interest to make ends meet' (Sum and Jessop 2013, p. 387). If class is simply constructed through discourse, how can Sum and Jessop assert that those classes are particularly hit by rising inflation? Surely, this is something independent on the political perspective of said groups or on whether said groups identify themselves as middle or working classes.

My final criticism of CPE in relation to class and interest, is that while emphasis is given to the 'intersectionality' of various struggles, identities and interests (something certainly worth emphasising) almost nothing is said about what kind of discourse creates connection between them. This problem then feeds into Purcell's criticism of 'economic reductionism due to methodological constriction' insofar as CPE does not develop the concepts necessary to articulate the connection between material interests and broader social and political phenomena. As I will show in the next section, this can be explained once we further develop CPE's notion of 'imaginary'.

The Social Commentary, Material Interests and Politics: Expanding the Scope of CPE

Jessop defines the imaginary as 'a semiotic ensemble (without tightly defined boundaries) that frames individual subjects' lived experience of an inordinately complex world and/or guides collective calculation about that world. There are many such imaginaries and they are involved in complex and tangled relations at different sites and scales of action' (Jessop 2012, p. 6). Considering our previous distinction between the cognitive aspect of practical life and speculation, the first problem with this notion is that it conflates the two. Thus, philosophical treatises and the handyman's knowledge of boilers would both fit this definition. The broadness of CPE's notion of imaginary is surprising considering that Sum and Jessop acknowledge the above distinction 'between first-order social

relations (seen from the viewpoint of their social agents and their construal of these relations) and second-order observation of these relations by external observers, where the focus is on the structural features and overall dynamic (logic) of these relations (Sum and Jessop 2013, p. 162).

While the definition of imaginary is rather broad, its discussion and operationalisation (See for example Sum and Jessop 2013, pp. 395–463, Jessop 2008, Sum 2013, Jessop 2016) of the concept is mostly restricted to ‘economic imaginaries,’ which appear to stand for conceptions of how the economy functions/should function. Indeed, the concept is mostly used to discuss narratives dealing with complex economic phenomena. Such narratives (imaginaries) are then employed to justify underlying accumulation regimes. For example, Shibata’s work uses the notion of economic imaginary to discuss the narrative describing ‘digital economy as a development which generates a number of important opportunities, particularly by offering more autonomous forms of work’ (Shibata 2020, p. 542). Gig work is then related to other broader features of social reality and described as having a socially beneficial role to play: ‘the pro-gig work discourse articulated has sought to highlight the way in which the autonomous nature of gig work would enable the government to address widespread concerns regarding working hours more generally within Japan’s labour market’ (Shibata 2020, p. 543). Similarly, Belfrage and Hauf use the notion of imaginary to describe the ‘Icelandic finance-dominated growth model’ (Belfrage and Hauf 2017, p. 264). Their study focuses on assessing the degree of support for said imaginary after the financial crisis. In Hauf’s previous work, the notion of imaginary is also used to discuss economic policy, as it is employed to analyse two narratives (the ‘feminist’ and ‘business care’ views) surrounding the notion of ‘decent work’ (Hauf 2015, pp. 141–142). Of course, there are some exceptions to this such as Reis’s work on Water-governance (Reis 2019) or Mayblin’s piece (Mayblin 2016) on narratives surrounding Asylum seekers in the UK.

While the concept of imaginary is useful, further development is necessary to spell out its different aspects and purposes. Specifically, we need to understand how ‘economic imaginaries’ can be linked to additional ‘ideas and practices’ which ‘are selected and drawn upon to recontextualize and hybridize’ ‘objects of governance’ (Sum and Jessop 2013, p. 226, 229). As it stands, Jessop’s and Sum’s notion does not provide the means to link our imaginary of the economy with other social phenomena, as well as not explaining how imaginaries (in general) contribute to interest creation and manipulation. Because of this, it is most successful at linking narratives justifying economic policy with underlying accumulation regimes they support. However, not all policy change can be reduced to changes in underlying accumulation regimes. While, from a theoretical standpoint, CPE allows for various social structures and ideas to effect state policy and intersect with economic structures, its operationalisation tends to privilege the economic moment. A similar argument has been made by Hay in relation to Jessop’s earlier works. When discussing Jessop’s analysis of the transition from the ‘Keynesian Welfare State’ to the ‘Schumpeterian Workfare State’ (Jessop 1993), Hay argues that this shift is reduced to ‘a putative transition from Fordism to Post-Fordism thus privileging the economic moment with causal priority in an analysis of a supposedly complexly overdetermined social formation’. In this context, ‘functionalist integral economic causality replaces the ultimately more sophisticated social formation causality prescribed in Jessop’s more purely theoretical formulations’ (Hay 1994, p. 332). This tendency to privilege economic structures when analysing state action is particularly problematic in today’s landscape, where policy seem sometimes determined by nationalist, religious and xenophobic sentiments rather than by the needs of capitalist accumulation. While surplus accumulation is still important, the means to explain its connection with other interests and motivations, must be provided.

As I argued earlier, CPE’s notion of imaginary does not distinguish between speculations and the cognitive side of practice (as both would fall under its definition). We must therefore begin by distinguishing *three aspects of the imaginary*¹: *the social commentary*, defined as *speculative thought directed at explaining social phenomena in their interconnections* (this includes things such as social problems and contradictions, events, structures and so on), *the vision of the future* (where a better world is imagined) and *the means* to bring this future about (political action broadly conceived).

The notion of social commentary isolates *speculative thought directed at explaining social phenomena in their interconnections*. This includes things such as social/economic problems (e.g. crime or unemployment) and contradictions (e.g. the relationship between capital and labour) events (e.g. economic crises or wars), structures (e.g. the market) and so on. The social commentary *explains and evaluates these phenomena*. This is often done *by relating one social phenomena with another* (even though they might also explain it by reference to *specific groups' or individuals' agency*, as with conspiracy theories) *through causal connections*.

CPE's discussion of the imaginary focuses on its practical significance (CPE explains well the process by which imaginaries develop into 'real social practices'). In doing so, *it does not pay enough attention to the social commentary's explanatory significance*. Consequentially, speculations concerning the social world themselves, are not explored in enough depth. They figure more as justifications for political action (the 'means' according to our previous distinctions) rather than as tools for (the previously necessary process of) group forming. Because of this, *CPE neglects the role of the social commentary in bringing heterogeneous actors together*² by connecting (or manipulating) their interests. This makes it difficult to integrate shifts and changes in groups' alliances (and consequent 'interests') within its framework. Furthermore, the relationship between material interests and broader political problems created by the social commentary (which crucially involves the integration of the former within the latter) are not discussed (although they are presupposed).

We can explain this relationship by reference to what Gramsci calls 'relations of force'. Gramsci distinguishes between 'various moments or levels': the 'primitive economic moment', the 'common trade' moment, 'the corporatist moment' and the 'hegemonic moment' (Gramsci 2011, pp. 179–180 /Gramsci 2014, pp. 457–458). The first refers to a *purely economic analysis*, where one considers *class distinctions* as well as the *social division of labour* (the specific industries existing within a given geographical location). With the *common trade moment* Gramsci wants to emphasise the realisation of belonging to the same trade. *The corporatist* is the broader moment, where classes (capitalists/workers) recognise their common interests. Finally, the *hegemonic moment* represents the point where economic groups must persuade others, and 'move beyond' the pursuit of material interests. This entails the creation of ideologies which are broad enough to appeal to the economic, political and cultural interests of other groups. By looking at the *first moment*, we can assess the '*raw material interests*', that is to say, we must look at how well economic groups (and their specific trades) are doing, their levels of economic hardship, their needs and their grievances. This 'level' must be considered in conjunction with CPE's analysis of surplus appropriation supported by each state's peculiar 'regime of accumulation'. Indeed, the *specific economic needs and grievances of groups must be conceived as results of previous cycles of accumulation*.³ As Marx explains (Marx and Engels 1976, p. 50), *results always become pre-conditions for new cycles*. This is the 'raw' level insofar as we consider those interests *without drawing any conclusions on how individuals involved perceive said interests in relation to other political struggles and social phenomena*.

On the other hand, by looking at the *common trade and corporatist moments* we begin to consider whether alliances along trade or class exist. This is not a given, and so at this level, *the discursive element* (as CPE argues) and *some basic social commentary* (highlighting common problems and their causes) becomes necessary for forming those alliances. The *hegemonic level* explores how the above conditions and interests (along with the various trade and corporate alliances which might exist) must then be addressed by the social commentary proposed by various factions of the ruling classes (whose own interest must also be expressed). Within this moment, interest manipulation reaches its highest levels of complexity insofar as the grievances of groups, and already existing trade or corporate alliances are incorporated into broader social commentaries addressing them. Since the social commentary creates casual relationships between various social phenomena (arbitrarily or not), the material interest of a specific group (e.g. high unemployment levels for manufacturing workers) can be linked (through casual connection) to some other social fact (e.g. government mismanagement, trade with China, corruption, globalisation, and what not.) This means that in the mind of the individual accepting said connection, *the satisfaction of material*

interests is seen as hindered by the social phenomenon which is said to be causing the frustration of said interest. A further interest in this social phenomenon (insofar as it is perceived as a 'hinderance' for the satisfaction of the material interest) is also formed. This process is what I called the transformation of material interest into political interest (Sau 2020, pp. 201–203)

Note that, since individuals are conceived as thinking philosophers and speculators, what narrative they decide to embrace is very difficult to predict, as each individual (even those within the same economic or social group) would find different narratives more or less appealing depending their personal views and experiences. In this respect, individuals are not 'constituted' as subjects, but they are rather faced with various narratives seeking to persuade them. In other words, *social commentaries do not constitute individuals as subjects, as their acceptance is determined by the individual's own ways of thinking and what he/she finds most persuasive.*⁴

As we said earlier, the purpose of this analysis was to develop a way to connect class interests and economic contradictions to broader political narratives without reducing the latter to the former. The social commentary is not merely a cynical justification for some underlying process of surplus accumulation, it is a tool for explaining social reality through (often simple and rudimentary) causal connections. For political actors to successfully build what we called the 'hegemonic moment', they must address the needs (material or broader social needs) of diverse groups as well as providing an explanation for their problems. By doing so, they can 'harvest' the grievances of said groups and mobilise them towards whatever is (constructed to be) the 'source' of the problem. While Brexit and Trump's trade war with China cannot be reduced to changes in accumulation regimes, the above process played a central role in determining their popular support. For example, the anti-EU movement mobilised the interests of fisheries (a specific trade) and linked their grievances with EU's regulations. On the other hand, Trump's trade war on China was embedded in a narrative which tried to address the interests of manufacturing workers (with emphasis on automobile and steel industries). Furthermore, due to the connections created by the social commentaries, interests and motives that go beyond crude logics of accumulations can be formed. This entails that *we must not always assume that the social commentary is simply a 'smokescreen' for the masses, as it can indeed be taken seriously by its preacher, and such, be the genuine source of motivation.*

Conclusion

This paper had three aims: (1) To defend CPE against accusations of structuralism and constructivism. (2) To point out that some tensions between the above extremes can nevertheless be found in CPE. (3) To resolve said tensions while also helping extend the theory's scope to deal with a broader range of political issues and state policies. I have argued that the notion of subjectivation presented by CPE implicitly lends itself to some sort of Althusserian structuralism whereby individuals are 'duped' into accepting their position within the socio-economic order. This position then clashes with CPE's emphasis on agency, struggle, and the possibility for change. To resolve this, I argued that a distinction between the 'cognitive aspect of practice' and speculation should be made. And, while I am not keen on the notion of subjunctivisation (due to the passivity often entailed), it might be used to describe those ideas and practices that individuals must learn 'out of necessity', in order to orientate herself within the social world. Nevertheless, I argued that, within the realm of speculation individuals maintain a certain degree of freedom (and should be conceived as 'philosophers' in this regard). Indeed, the fact that individuals consent to the socio-economic order practically, does not mean they accept it uncritically. Such critical view of the social world is not merely something left-leaning revolutionaries have. Centrists, conservatives, and far-right groups are often critical of the status-quo, or at least some aspects of it. This is 'uncomfortably' shown in Belfrage and Hauf's work on the Icelandic financial model. After appearing on national television, the authors were approached by 'extreme right groups'. As a result, 'the team was forced to reflect upon the impact of the research project,

fearing that it had energized social forces with which it could not ally' (Belfrage and Hauf 2017, p. 265).

This leads us to the second tension within CPE in regard to class, interests and other political struggles. As I have shown, CPE's more explicit statements bend the stick towards constructivism (whereby class struggle is set by discourse), while the notion of 'objective interests' leads towards the structuralist Marxism Jessop and Sum want to reject. By developing the notion of imaginary in line with my research on ideology, I have shown how already existing material interests, needs and grievances (determined by previous cycles of surplus accumulation, and corresponding to different positions within the social division of labour) are addressed and explained by what I called 'social commentaries'. The various commentaries then shape the way in which said interests are perceived by providing different ways of explaining them and resolving them. Indeed, the same socio-economic problem can be explained in various ways, leading to completely different policy proposals. For example, as Haufs and Belf's research show, the critique of the financial system might lead to left-wing ethical communitarianism as much as it can lead to far-right anti-Semitism (whereby finance is conflated with the Jewish people). Consequentially, the way in which political factions form remain unpredictable. It is hard to tell what people will find the most 'appealing' explanation, as various sections of ruling classes will try to address their problems by drawing different connections between their material needs and other social phenomena, institutions or groups.

By distinguishing between material conditions and the grievances of economic groups with broader political actions, we can explain the relationship between the two without falling either into constructivism or structuralism. Furthermore, the above considerations could help bridging the gap between logics of capitalist accumulation and other more specific practices tied with particular cultures and places. Indeed, while the economic element can be analysed starting from CPE's discussion of accumulation regimes, other interests fused with economic needs will most likely be tied with a specific country's history and culture (e.g. the frustration of economic needs is blamed on a 'historic enemy' or on some endemic social problems such as the mafia in Italy). This could lead to the sort of 'in-depth analysis' of specific conjectures advocated by van Heur, without losing sight of their relationship to the logics of surplus accumulation. Finally, the above considerations could help us provide the means to synthesise CPE's analysis of state action with Purcell's notion of 'citizen-state relation'. We could indeed argue that the satisfaction of a certain level (varying depending on the country's wealth) of material needs is necessary to maintain the legitimacy of the 'citizen-state relation'. However, whether said needs are actually met through economic policy or simply lead to shallow policy informed by scapegoating (e.g. tighter immigration controls) cannot be asserted a-priori.

Overall, I hope this piece will help extending the scope of CPE by allowing it to analyse complex relationships between capitalist logics and other political issues through the connections made by social commentaries. This is of paramount importance in today's unpredictable political environment, where sentiments and ideas we thought gone for good are coming back with vengeance. Of course, whether what I say is of any use is for Sum and Jessop to decide.

Notes

1. Note that within my research I call this 'ideology' instead (Sau 2020).
2. Instead, this role seems to be given to the notion of 'subjectivation'.
3. Of course, things other than surplus accumulation might affect those needs (as Covid-19 has amply showed).
4. Of course, conformism exists, and individuals might be 'pressured' to accept certain views. However, I believe this is more of a horizontal process (between people within the same environment) rather than a vertical (top-down inculcation) one. If I am surrounded by a great number of people who believe x, x acquires an aura of legitimacy and truth. As Gramsci puts it, 'the man of the people thinks that so many cannot be wrong' (Gramsci 2014, p. 2, 1391).

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Notes on Contributor

Andrea's research revolves around political and social theory as well as political economy and theories of ideology. His focus has been on the Marxist tradition, in particular the works of Marx and Antonio Gramsci. His PhD is a Marxist theory of ideology based on an in-depth reading of their works.

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