From Politics to Culture—and Back

by Anny Brooksbank Jones


In a recent study of Basque nationalism, Daniele Conversi represents cultural struggle as an enforced displacement of political struggle and as tending to cede to it as soon as conditions allow. The three books discussed here all, in their different ways, illustrate the reversibility of this process: when traditional politics is perceived as increasingly constrained, “culture” emerges—or comes to be seen—as a key force for social change. This dynamic is explicit both in the culture-based activities of certain grassroots and other groups under the dictatorships and in the appropriation of these activities as activism or “cultural politics” by left cultural critics working in an increasingly cash-starved and commercially oriented academy. It is increasingly urgent and evident as the effects of technological and economic globalization extend to political and cultural spheres. For two of the three texts discussed here, the existence of this dynamic does not imply the wholesale displacement of traditional formal politics or political theory by versions of cultural theory or activism. The third is more ambiguous. All these texts combine a sense of culture’s politically and socially transformative potential with a postmodern-inflected concern for subjectivities and reflexivity. And while aspects of classical Marxist analysis inform each, all three question the automatic prioritization of class politics at the expense of notions of individual agency in the context of transnational capitalism. This review article explores these tensions and the broader implications of the rise of “cultural politics” within globalizing capitalism. In particular, it contrasts definitions of culture, politics, and their interrelations deployed (explicitly or implicitly) in the texts and the authors’ attempts to elaborate alternatives to modern and postmodern paradigms perceived as in crisis.

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Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd’s *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital* is a collection of essays by cultural and social theorists, historians, and anthropologists that offers a range of critical perspectives on “the global” as a framework for interpreting interrelated sets of political practices. These perspectives are highly contemporary, with only 6 of the 18 essays having been published elsewhere. They are also very broad: the near-600 pages include essays on Colombian environmental politics (Arturo Escobar), Zapatismo (José Rabasa), Sandinista agricultural policy (María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo), and postcolonial Haiti (Grant Farred), on gender and ethnic politics in China, Britain, the United States, the Asian Pacific, Canada, and Iran, and on South Asian labor history, Basque and other nationalisms, Indian people’s theater, and popular memory in South Korea. In order to sharpen the volume’s focus, contributions are grouped under four headings, covering critiques of and alternatives to modernity, examples of coalition politics, and (less convincingly) “world culture and practice.” In their terse, highly synthetic, and theoretically sophisticated introduction the editors frame the essays in terms that insist less on their overall breadth than on the specificity of individual contributions. Less uneven than most collections of this scope, virtually all essays manage to combine a detailed understanding of the contexts and material circumstances discussed with an engaged and theoretically astute interpretation of their wider cultural-political implications. Particularly interesting is the way in which the volume’s introduction draws together these sharply defined local instances and their wider resonances, first to ground its rejection of global models and second to propose an alternative form of internationalism.

Nelson W. Keith’s *Reframing International Development* is also concerned with heterogeneity, interdependence, and the global. Like Lowe and Lloyd’s volume it is predicated on the crises of modernity and postmodernity and on the need to review critiques of both in order to clear the theoretical ground and then to sketch out a new vocabulary and a new agenda for the elaboration of an alternative. His review of critiques focuses on the philosophical implications of the Enlightenment project and, in particular, the epistemological fractures that modernity (conceived as one possible response to Enlightenment concerns) is currently undergoing. Culture figures here as a key force in ecological development and an agent for wider social change. Above all, it is represented as contributing to the opening up of space within global development models for racial, Third World, and other forms of difference. In contrast to Lowe and Lloyd, Keith does not make it clear how far his insistence on otherness represents an overcoming and how far a simple (or more strategic) inversion of the traditional binary. This is partly because, as he himself concedes, the volume allocates considerably more space to a review of critiques than to the working out of alternative development concepts and models. This radical imbalance underlies the lack of critical focus in much of the analysis, which juxtaposes concepts and arguments from an awe-inspiring range of sources—from classical Greece through Shakespeare and Wordsworth to Russian formalism, Derrida, Haraway, and many, many others—while leaving virtually no room to consider their wider implications.

While Lowe and Lloyd examine the interrelations of culture and politics in both local and international frames, Keith’s is a resolutely international perspective. In his
Decentering the Regime, by contrast, Jeffrey W. Rubin explores the interrelation of local politics, both informal and formal, with traditional regional and national forms of party politics. Although Rubin is a political scientist by training, this study of Zapotec political culture in Juchitán is clearly influenced by cultural studies. Nowhere is this more obvious than in his impressively detailed exploration of the contradictions and ambiguities, negotiations and challenges through which what he defines as everyday Zapotec cultural politics interacts with formal politics. The daily lives and cultural and other rituals of these indigenous Mexicans and their conception of Zapotec ethnicity are represented as both transformed by and transforming the formal and informal political contexts in which they operate. The “national” figures here as one partial and changing element in a complex set of power relations. Thus, the Zapotec’s strong and well-mobilized political organization Coalición de Obreros, Campesinos y Estudiantes del Istmo (Coalition of Workers, Peasants, and Students of the Isthmus—COCEI) is described as having transformed Zapotec lives not through homogeneous class or ethnic consciousness (as it might claim) but by balancing a range of contrasting cultural-political practices and representations. Rubin’s study is detailed and painstakingly judicious. It traces the processes by which the Zapotec community established its capacity for autonomous and local-initiated action from the mid-century, the subsequent transformation of its allegiances by changing economic and cultural changes as elites imported “external” values and objectives, and the politicization of Zapotec culture from the 1960s through the work of artists and intellectuals who incorporated different national and international perspectives in their production. In particular, it examines the overlapping modes of violence, negotiation, and cultural and electoral politics in which the indigenous coordinating party COCEI, with its own decentered political perspective, came to power. Rubin’s analysis is unimpeachable. His disinclination to draw wider conclusions from the cultural-political instances and relations described is wholly consistent with his insistence on specificity. Yet, in the absence of the wider (albeit very different) political projects that animate the other two volumes, the end result feels oddly truncated.

This impression may be linked to the national frame of Rubin’s analysis, as compared with the more global perspectives asserted by Lowe, Lloyd, and Keith. Neither of these other volumes is uncritical of the notion of the global, however. Keith assumes a Third World perspective in order to criticize the effacement of racial and other forms of difference within global development models and processes. Lowe and Lloyd also register the extent to which (like liberal and postmodern explanatory frames) globalization theories tend to underplay the heterogeneity of social practices. At the same time, however, they foreground the tendency of heterogeneous transnational capitalist modes of production to undermine national boundaries and class analysis and to reduce the ability of civil society to mediate disjunctions between cultural practices and the modernizing impositions of the state. If this is reminiscent of Renato Ortiz’s work on globalization (1994, 1996), Keith’s insistence on its hybridizing of modern and nonmodern elements is more reminiscent of García Canclini (1990, 1995b). For Lowe and Lloyd, globalization also undermines claims regarding the
pervasiveness of capitalism and commodification. This is not a defense of noncommodified consumption of the type mounted by García Canclini in his Consumidores y ciudadanos (1995b). \(^3\) Nor are they positing some form of utopian precapitalist space. Rather, they highlight “the intersection of commodification and labor exploitation under postmodern transnational modes of production with the historical emergence of social formation in time with but also in antagonism to modernity” (Lowe and Lloyd, 1997: 15). In their account, this dynamic of adaptation and antagonism gives rise to contradictions between “capitalist economic formations and the social and cultural practices they presume but cannot dictate.” In particular, “culture” becomes “political” when “a cultural formation comes into contradiction with economic or political logics that try to refunction it for exploitation or domination” (1997: 1). Emerging from Lowe and Lloyd’s own political logic, however, is a familiar contradiction in the notion of culture itself as it weaves in and out of their theorizing. The term “culture” is used to invoke not only anthropological and aesthetic categories but also—as the “terrain in which politics, culture [anthropological, aesthetic, or otherwise], and the economic form an inseparable dynamic” (1997: 1)—the possibility of their diacritical force. The resulting slippage increases the term’s flexibility while dissipating its analytical force.

Lowe and Lloyd are more concerned about the contradictions that arise from the clashing economic, political, and cultural logics of globalizing modernity. The question, however, is how, and from where, its critics are to speak about the possibility of an alternative to these logics. Keith presents his case for “an other” logic, open to what are represented as Third World claims, from within the U.S. academic elite. \(^4\) From this elite group Lowe and Lloyd appropriate what they term “Third World Marxism” to ground their search for a new internationalism. They do so on the assumption that “Western Marxism” cannot be applied to different forms of state and culture, different conditions and social forms. Which version of Third World Marxism they have in mind and why states, cultures, and conditions are assumed to be homogeneous across the whole of the Third World are not clarified. Postcolonial theorists have advanced powerful critiques of elite attempts to speak for the First World’s “others.” However, Lowe and Lloyd explicitly reject these critiques on the ground that “the ‘postcolonial’ concept” prioritizes independence—the seizure of the state—and entry into Western modernity as “the decisive defining moment of struggle” (1997: 6). In practice, they suggest (following Chungmoo Choi), intranational “connections and struggles [may be] ongoing and simultaneous with, but not less important than state nationalism—theories and practices that [particularly in globalization] cross national boundaries . . . need not be mediated by the state.” This is a compelling argument and one that turns to account the increasing permeability of borders by insisting on the diverse local articulations of emerging political practices and the possibilities of exchange and collaboration between them. In this respect Lowe and Lloyd seek to undermine rather than reverse the familiar local/global binary. With the rejection of the postcolonial as a critical frame, however, is lost a means of theorizing reflectively the asymmetrical power relations at stake in this process. To the extent that it eases the imposition of a
homogenized distillation of Third World Marxism on all non-First World states, this absence marks an unresolved tension in their project to elaborate a new, locally negotiated internationalism.

Like Lowe and Lloyd, Keith places an appropriation of Marxist theory, praxis, and (above all) materialism at the heart of his project. It was Marxism, he notes, that spotlighted the dynamic of dependency that has been central to much Third World analysis. For Lowe and Lloyd, Marxist theory and praxis have been a crucial corrective to the bourgeois nationalism that their non-state-centered approach strongly rejects. However, both analyses take issue with Marxist historiography. Keith criticizes the positivist linearity of its developmental model and, above all, its tendency either to ignore the “nonmodern” or to conceive it as merely a transitional point on the route to socialism. His point is underscored in Lowe and Lloyd’s volume by José Rabasa (“Of Zapatismo: Reflections on the Folkloric and the Impossible in a Subaltern Insurrection”), who presents the Zapatistas’ struggle as an eruption of the nonmodern into the modern, while obliquely underscoring the hybrid nature of both terms. Although Lowe and Lloyd place economic formations at the heart of their model, like Keith they claim to accord the economic no special privilege. Although they do not address this tension directly, it can be explained as marking a historical crossing point or (in their own terms) equilibrium and one that has particular significance for my opening comments on the rise of culture. Though writing explicitly in the tradition of a certain Third World Marxism that has customarily prioritized economic relations, they insist on the increased importance of “culture” (however defined) in social and political analysis. In their account, modernity has elevated the economic to the master narrative and principal metaphor for political transformation by ignoring culture and by representing it as universally commodified. From this perspective, the elevation of culture does not demote the economic or the political so much as restore a supposedly originary equilibrium. More will be said shortly about the foundationalist naturalism implicit in this claim and the notion of politics and culture that underpins it. Keith, significantly, makes no such claim, despite the fact that his critique of the Enlightenment basis of economic rationality leads him, too, to question the automatic prioritizing of the economic. Like Laclau, he sees postmodernity as one more modulation of Enlightenment themes and categories and traces the shortcomings of both modernity and postmodernity back to the “maturing contradictions” inherent in these categories (1997: 28). Like Lowe and Lloyd, however, he does not dismiss the economic instance altogether. Instead, it figures as one of a range of dynamically interrelated variables implicated in social and political change, including “race, ethnicity, gender, culture, and ‘Nature’” (1997: 3). These noneconomic variables will retain a key role, Keith insists, in ensuring that alternatives to current forms of modernity and postmodernity are informed by emancipatory Enlightenment notions. He terms this interplay of forces “globalism” and aligns it broadly with globalization as defined by Held: “an intensification of levels of interaction and interconnectedness among the states and societies which make up international society” (quoted in Keith, 1997: 26). Globalism is presented as more specific, however: as a transnational, transcultural, transformative process grounded in an ethics that recognizes global diversity.
What distinguishes Keith’s “diversity” from Lowe and Lloyd’s “heterogeneity” is their different understandings of contemporary cultural politics and (to a lesser extent) of political culture. His political analysis is broader and more rhetorical, more widely but less coherently theorized than theirs. He roots his ethical globalism explicitly in democratic traditions that he sees as in constant tension with an “other-derived recalcitrance”—a recalcitrance reminiscent of the principled “unruliness” that Rubin (1997: 275) characterizes as a motor of democratic change in Juchitán. But Keith’s globalism is driven less by pluralism (which he defines as concerned with equality, regardless of distributive issues) than by broad notions of justice, the need to acknowledge otherness and to “recognize all.” To this extent it is also “a watchdog...a potential political agenda” (1997: 27). Initially, he acknowledges, this agenda will be grounded in affirmations of identity as much as difference. Keith is not unaware of the political and philosophical charges leveled at identity politics: indeed, the main reason for his rejection of postmodernist theorizing (which he elides throughout with poststructuralism) is its rejection of identity politics as essentializing. Nor does he dwell on postcolonial and other perspectives that emphasize hybridity at the expense of identity. At the same time, he acknowledges more explicitly than do Lowe and Lloyd the political fragmentation widely associated with heterogeneity claims and identity politics. In response, he adduces “an unprecedented critical massing of dynamic social transformative fragments [that is] giving a new global politics a realistic potential” (1997: 257). This potential can be realized, he suggests, with “a politics of recognition” based on “confluences, elective affinities, between the varieties of the Other(s) striving to fashion politically viable accommodations” (1997: 257). His “major examples of these confluences” are “a general antipathy to an all-embracing domination” intensified by “visible chinks in the armor of modernity”; a widespread notion that “difference owes its origins and its emancipation to self-conscious political struggle [with] less reliance [being] placed on the role of the state, the public sphere”; a “shared belief that [women’s and Third World] domination has been instituted in part by forms of cultural seduction and cultricide”; the “correspondence between the ethic of care with much [sic] of the cosmological and axiological aspects of Afrocentricity, with the earth philosophy of indigenous peoples, ecofeminism”; and a desire among women’s, indigenous, green and other groups to exchange “power over” for “power to” (1997: 258-259). Whether or not their confluences are as powerful or as widespread as Keith suggests, there are some interesting examples here. However, they cannot provide an adequate basis for “a politics grounded in shared interests” until a more detailed account is given of the dynamics that operate between these self-empowering groups and the “all-embracing domination” (however defined) that they are rejecting, as well as between and within the groups themselves. Keith’s “politics of affinity” cannot rely solely on this gesture toward broad tendencies if it is to counter the pluralism and fragmentation associated with the diverse activism and claims of identity-based groups.

Lowe and Lloyd share Keith’s concern to connect heterogeneous political instances, as well as his awareness that politics is increasingly indebted to self-conscious political struggle and less reliant on the state. Further, the heterogeneities on
which they focus are chiefly subaltern and women’s struggles, which are seen as hav-
ing particular potential to rework politics in an era of transnational forces. Contribu-
tors to the volume bring together national Marxist and new feminist and subaltern pro-
jects to underline the inadequacies of current notions of political agency as
determined by the supposedly discrete spheres of politics, economics, and culture.
Rubin is even more explicitly concerned with breaking down barriers between sup-
posedly separate discourses and spheres of action: between present and past, region
and nation, locality and state, everyday resistance and formal political mobilization.
His study once again emphasizes the nonhomogeneity of grassroots struggles and the
fact that the regime is not the exclusive possessor of hegemonic authority but rather
one component in a complex set of power relations. He, too, highlights the
nonlinearity of political narratives and the lack of definition that characterizes politi-
cal objectives embedded in complex political and cultural experiences. Like Keith,
Rubin is especially interested in relations of ethnicity and power and in the tropes that
mediate relations between locales and outside authorities. Above all, he underlines
the extent to which the national is produced in and through the regional and to which
“culture” consists of interrelated national, regional, or local beliefs and practices. Pol-
itics is described, defined, and refined here in all its complexity. Yet unlike the other
writers discussed, Rubin does not present himself as explicitly engaged in politics.
This may be because his focus is indigenous activism rather than a broader anticapital-
ist or Third World(ist) oppositional politics. Opposition nevertheless lies at the heart
of his democratic model, specifically in spaces that can “be forged, in or out of elected
government, for the militancy and disruption that may be necessary to reinforce and
deepen democratic politics” (1997: 274). For Rubin, the political strategies of COCEI
demonstrate how to be radical, how to take on the regime and resist the language of
development and cultural normalization, and, at the same time, how to profit from
what he represents as the benefits and pleasures of new technology. There may be
arguments about how much of these nonlocal goods to appropriate, he notes, but it is
precisely in these arguments that contemporary Zapotec culture and cultural politics
are shaped. From his analysis there emerges a compelling picture of the potential for
local (indigenous and other) empowerment and of the embeddedness of versions of
democracy in regional historical and cultural formations.

Culture figures in Rubin’s account as the interrelated beliefs and practices present
in the policy making of the central state, the municipal discourses of decency and citi-
zenship, and the elaboration of indigenous ritual. To this extent, it has a formal politi-
cal, a social, and an anthropological dimension. By contrast, Keith uses the Raymond
Williams of Keywords to highlight the complexity of the term “culture,” only to wan-
der thereafter without signposts between culture as an aesthetic, developmental, or
anthropological process or product and culture as (in Williams’s phrase) “the whole
way of life of a people” (quoted by Keith, 1997: 187). Despite the references to Wil-
liams, the materialism of culture is dissipated in these meanderings. Although (as
noted) Lowe and Lloyd can also be vague in their use of the term, their analysis does
insist on its materiality as the terrain in which politics, culture, and economics form a
single dynamic. Where Keith uses culture to insist on the eruption of rhetoric through
the cracks in Enlightenment rationality, Lowe and Lloyd show how culture can open up these cracks in search of alternative forms of rationality. Culture for them is, above all, a space that emerges in economic and political processes and in which the reproduction of capitalist social relations and antagonism toward them can be articulated. It can take the form of work, pleasure, spirituality, consumption, aesthetic production or reproduction, all caught within a process of continuous historical transformation. When, like Keith, they refuse to collapse culture into the economic instance, they are not echoing familiar objections to economicist dismissals of culture. In their account, transnational capitalism has tended to collapse culture into the economic where labor has become commodified. Now, they suggest, there is scope for culture to become political once again in opposition to this process.

Despite the literary specialisms of both Lowe and Lloyd, the culture to be politicized here is clearly not restricted to the domain of the aesthetic. That is, no return is proposed to the Latin American phenomenon of the 1960s that David Viñas rather sweepingly termed “la politización de los literatos” and “la literaturización de los políticos” or to the accompanying deficit model of cultural analysis in which the region’s left cultural critics rooted through texts for signs of domination or dependency (Viñas, 1970: 22; García Canclini, 1995a). The politicizing commended by Lowe and Lloyd is broader and more positive, and it returns us, at last, to the question we began with: Does the positive political force increasingly being attributed to culture (however “culture” is defined) necessarily imply a depoliticized or dematerialized “enculturing” of politics? I would argue that it does not, despite a marked trend along these lines in certain types of cultural studies work. This trend reflects and compounds a tendency to make definitions of culture and politics so broad as to be very blunt analytical instruments indeed, on the basis of which (as Keith’s study demonstrates) vague and inflated claims for both can too easily be made. Raymond Williams opened up both terms at a crucial stage in the academic study of culture. But while the importance of his insistence on the materiality of culture remains beyond question, there is no doubt that the contemporary contexts in which his insights are appropriated radically reinflect them. Today, the constraints imposed on national autonomy—an autonomy that was never unqualified—by political, economic, cultural, and other globalizing forces have helped to make formal politics less resonant for an increasing number of people and in ways that Williams could only imagine. In the process, these constraints have helped make locally based “cultural activism” (understood as rituals and practices oriented toward social change) an increasingly important arm in the oppositional repertoire. While the “micropolitical” status of avant-garde affirmations of subjectivity is open to question, the political force of culture in these instances seems unambiguous (García Canclini, 1990; Franco, 1996; Brooksbank Jones, 1997). These same constraints have contrived to ease a de facto enculturing of politics. Pace Lowe and Lloyd, this does not imply the restoration of a supposedly original equilibrium or an oscillation between the two: the conditions in which culture circulated and was consumed at the time of the Enlightenment are not those of contemporary transnational capitalism, nor is there any evidence (millennial euphoria notwithstanding) that the current phase of capitalism represents its culmination. Within Latin
America, principled resistance to the enculturing of politics largely reflects the shortcomings of current examples: the demagogic neoliberal exploitation of TV for political purposes has been particularly widely and critically documented (García Canclini, 1990, 1995b; Martín-Barbero, 1987, 1995, 1997; Sarlo, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1998). As Rubin demonstrates, however, there are other models available in which a cultural dimension can make political activism richer and more effective and more thoroughly informed by local needs and values. But what is missing from Rubin’s pragmatic Zapotec model is a consistent oppositional perspective, however articulated. As transnational capitalism further curtails political and cultural options, the maintenance of such a perspective is progressively more crucial for those who question the goods that capitalism makes available and the basis of their distribution. It remains to be seen whether pragmatism, short-termism, and all the other charges leveled at it are inevitable features of encultured politics. In the meantime, if the crisis of modern and postmodern paradigms requires a new logic, it cannot be one that rejects the claims of either traditional formal or encultured politics. It needs to be a supplementary logic that recognizes the claims, the potential, and the indispensibility of both if more social actors are to be engaged in oppositional politics.

NOTES

1. On cultural politics, liberal cultural criticism, and the emergence of “cultural studies lite” see Brooksbank Jones (1997).
2. In view of the limited space available, my remarks are restricted largely to the volume’s extended editorial introduction.
3. On this see also Brooksbank Jones (2000).
4. This authorial standpoint is affirmed rather than demonstrated or defined in the study: apart from a reference to an earlier study of Jamaica, the author is presented on the volume’s jacket and in the biographical note simply as a respected U.S.-based sociologist and former diplomat.
5. Despite his many references to poststructuralist theories, Keith does not acknowledge that his insistence on the negative definition “nonmodern” limits its potential difference from the “modern” by assigning it the status of not-A rather than B. His occasional references to their hybridization and interdependence is arguably a more telling way of undermining the claims of the modern.
6. Alongside this critique of economic rationality, it would have been interesting to see something on forms of contemporary economic irrationality such as environmental short-termism, but neither Lowe and Lloyd nor Keith have anything to say on the subject.
7. This focus on the eruption of rhetoric into political and other forms of rationality can be seen at work in “new historical” writing. A recent example is Alan West’s Hayden White-influenced Tropics of History: Cuba Imagined (1997). The crisis of contemporary historiography can be circumvented, West claims, by a hermeneutically grounded substitution of history by rhetoric. Rhetoric figures here as tropes, defined as “an intersubjective phenomenology tied to collective reality, with a lived historicity” (1997: 5). Metaphors and imagery taken from “the artistic realm” can thus (it is claimed) enable the reader to reimagine Cuban history in a version autho-
rized by selected Cuban writers (1997: 4). In practice, this looks less like a circumvention of the historiographic crisis registered by Keith and by Lowe and Lloyd than a flight from it into a weak literary criticism.

8. And, as García Canclini (1990; 1995b) notes, at the same time the circulation of cultural goods and practices within complex transnational and national capitalist networks has made the notion of a politically neutral “art for art’s sake” progressively less tenable.

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