

## Outline

- Cultural Political Economy
- Varieties of cultural turn
- Mr Greenspan's ontological reflections
- Ontic and epistemic complexity
- Articulating the 'C' and 'PE' in CPE
- Steering between Scylla and Charybdis
- Variation, selection, and retention
- Conclusions



### Cultural Political Economy - I

- CPE is a broad 'post-disciplinary' current (not a school and with no ambition to become one) in institutional and evolutionary political economy
- It makes a 'cultural turn' in economic and political studies (or political economy) to enhance their interpretive and explanatory power (this turn is also useful in other fields)
- It focuses on the nature and role of semiosis (sense- and meaning-making) in the dynamics of economics and politics and puts them in their wider social settings
- It can contribute to critiques of ideology (*Ideologiekritik*) and domination (*Herrschaftskritik*)

### Cultural Political Economy - II

- CPE studies role of semiosis in *construing* and *constructing* economic, political (and social) 'realities'
- CPE argues that semiosis is both causally effective *and* meaningful. Events and processes and their effects can be interpreted *and*, in part, *explained* by semiotic practices
- CPE notes that, while *all* construals are *equal*, *some* are *more* equal than others; it aims to explain this through dialectic of cultural and social factors
- CPE has evolutionary approach: starting from *variation* in construals, what factors (semiotic and *extra-semiotic*) shape differential *selection*, subsequent *retention*?



### Making (Cultural) Turns

The more or less consistent elaboration of the intuition, hypothesis, or discovery that 'culture matters' in one or more theoretical, empirical, or practical contexts where its role or relevance was previously missed, noted but ignored, or quite explicitly rejected

- There is wide variation in how culture is defined, the ways in which it is deemed to 'matter', and the motives and arguments for suggesting that it does
- 'Cultural turn' applies to trajectories of individual scholars; general developments in given approach; changes in relative weight of approaches in a broader disciplinary field; or general trends in the humanities and social sciences

### Ontological and Reflexive Turns in CPE

- CPE builds on *thematic* and *methodological* turns to make an *ontological* turn: semiosis reduces complexity of a world pregnant with many possibilities for action
- CPE may also make a *reflexive* turn, studying genealogy of different social sciences and approaches, incl. CPE, their methods, social embedding, and social effects
- CPE is *not* limited to semiotic *themes*, *methods*, or *semiosis* nor must it begin with them: it can begin with the *structuration* of social life, turning to semiosis later
- Technologies and agency affect semiotic and structural moments and their spatio-temporal configurations

### Mr Greenspan's Ontological Reflections

REP. WAXMAN: Do you feel that your ideology pushed you to make decisions that you wish you had not made?

MR GREENSPAN: remember what an ideology is: a conceptual framework for people to deal with reality. Everyone has one. You have to - to exist, you need an ideology. The question is whether it is accurate or not ... I've found a flaw. I don't know how significant or permanent it is. But I've been very distressed by that fact ... A flaw in the model that I perceived as the critical functioning structure that defines how the world works, so to speak (Congressional Hearing, 23 Oct 2008)



Chair, Federal Reserve, 1987-2006

### Ontic and Epistemic Complexity ...

- 'Everyone' must simplify the natural and social world to be able to 'go on' within it:
  - selective observation of real world,
  - reliance on specific codes and programmes,
  - use of categories and forms of calculation,
  - sensitivity to specific structures of feeling,
  - reference to particular identities,
  - justification via 'vocabularies of motives'
  - conjunctural calculation of short- to long-term interests,
  - and so on

### ... and the Economy

- The 'actually existing economy' is the chaotic sum of all economic activities and cannot be grasped in all its complexity.
- So the economy as an object of observation, calculation, management, or governance never comprises all economic activities but is an 'enforced selection' of a more or less coherent subset of all economic activities
- Simplifications may aid economic steering if they have requisite variety and are reflexive
- Greenspan admits to flaws in his economic imaginary: 'efficient market hypothesis' is a bad simplification



### Caution! Yet more Complexity

- Economic imaginary is a 'term of art' that can include technological paradigms, production norms, labour process, forms of economic organization, competition, enterprise, markets, the public sector, taxation, and so on
- Content of economic imaginary is not pre-given but some economic imaginary is necessary to 'go on' economically
- The enforced selectivity of an imaginary may assist successful economic steering when it has requisite variety and is reflexive – but it can also lead to steering failure due to the 'revenge' of what has been ignored
- The same points hold for other types of social imaginary

### Contesting Social Imaginaries - I

- Social imaginaries have key roles in struggles for 'hearts and minds' and over exploitation and domination
- What Greenspan calls 'ideologies' are better seen as personal frameworks shaping 'lived experience' and/or as simplifying 'social imaginaries' to deal with the world
- Some imaginaries are more powerful because they are promoted by dominant apparatuses/institutions that use technologies to advance semiosis and structuration
- These hegemonic (or, at least, dominant) imaginaries shape leading ways of thinking about social relations, their crisis-tendencies, and crisis-management routines



### Contesting Social Imaginaries - II

- Imaginaries are not pre-given mental categories: they are the creative products of semiotic and material practices that have more or less performative power
- Social forces try to make their imaginary the hegemonic or dominant 'frame' in particular contexts and/or to promote it as a sub- or counter-hegemonic imaginary. Successful framing leads to an historical bloc (Gramsci)
- This contestation and struggles are mediated via semiosis, structuration, particular technologies, and specific agents

### Putting the 'C' into CPE - I

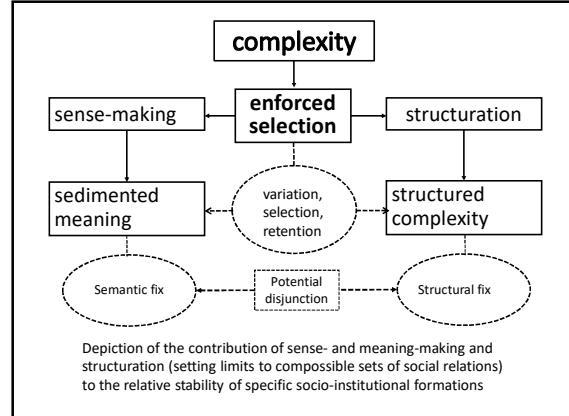
- Intersubjective meaning making develops via semiosis as a socially adequate form of communication-cooperation that presupposes and posits (further develops) language
- Language has lexical, semantic, and pragmatic features: more weight given to one or other depending on context
- Not all words or signs are created equal: some are more fundamental to structuring interaction and limiting possible combinations of social relations than others
- These categories provide fundamental forms of thought and modes of being in the world and thus shape social relations: they merit *Ideologiekritik* and *Herrschaftskritik*

### Putting the 'C' into CPE - II

- All construals are *equal* (semiotically); some are *more equal* than others in their constitutive, constructive effects
- The key question is how construals are mediated: how do they vary, why are some selected as basis for action, why are some retained and institutionalized as bases for efforts to construct (transform) natural and social worlds?
- Only construals that grasp emergent extra-semiotic features of social worlds and mind-independent aspects of the natural world are likely to be *selected* and *retained*
- Some in turn create changes in the extra-semiotic aspects of the world and related (always) tendential social logics

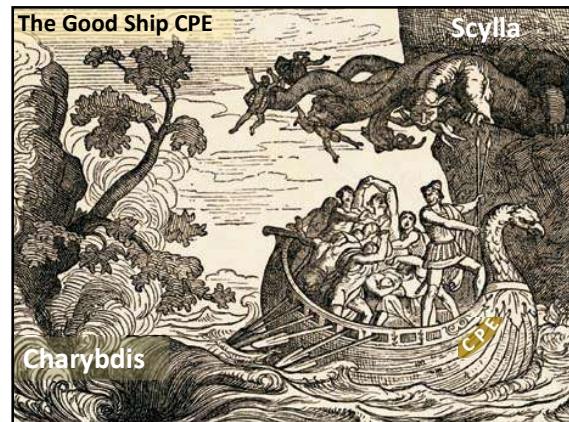
### Structuration

- Structuration sets limits (however achieved) on the articulation of sets of social relations such that 'not everything that is possible is *compossible*'
- This involves
  - stabilizing cognitive and normative expectations
  - guiding individual and organizational learning
  - deploying disciplinary technologies
  - securing institutional complementarities
  - establishing principles of social organization
  - also related to structural coupling and co-evolution
  - and to ecological dominance of certain systems



### Putting the 'PE' into CPE

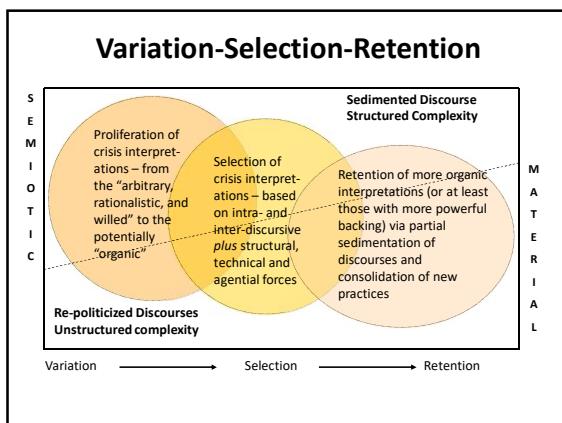
- CPE insists on specificities of at least some *emergent* aspects of the form, content, and logics of social relations of 'political economy' and its products
- As *enforced selection*, economic imaginaries ignore key features of actually existing economies, which continue to have real effects, including:
  - contradictions, dilemmas, and paradoxes
  - extra-economic conditions of existence and effects
  - spatio-temporal depth, breadth, rhythms, sequencing, etc
- So CPE studies structuration and dynamic of economic (and economically-relevant or conditioned) activities, thereby contributing to *Herrschafts-* and *Ideologiekritik*



Constructivist Charybdis	Structuralist Scylla
Grasps semiotic-material construction of social relations, reveals social embedding, notes its performative impact	Grasps <i>distinctiveness</i> of specific economic categories and their structured/ structuring nature in wider social formations
But finds it hard to define specificity of economic relations relative to other relations – because they are all discursive	But reifies such categories, fetishizes economic structures as natural, and views agents as mere <i>Träger</i> of economic logics
Strong risk of idealism, defining economic relations in terms of their manifest <i>semiotic content</i>	Strong risk of economic determinism, explaining economic processes in terms of ' <i>iron laws</i> '
" <i>Soft Economic Sociology</i> "	" <i>Hard Political Economy</i> "

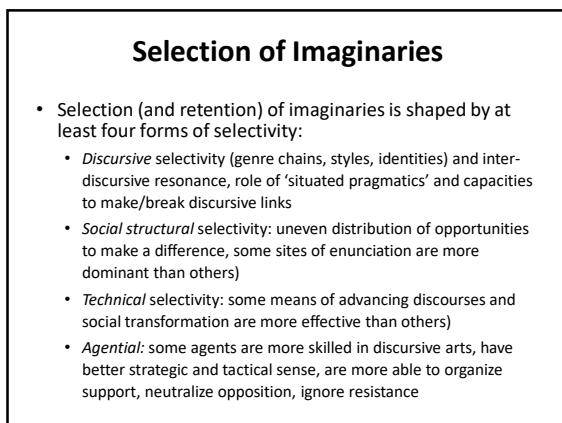
## Social and/or Cultural?

- Social/cultural is an *analytical* distinction that identifies 'moments' of complex world as entrypoints for analysis
- Social = emergent properties of interaction (e.g. social cohesion, institutional fit, structural contradiction)
- Cultural = emergent properties of discursive formations (e.g., style, genre chains, intertextuality)
- Insofar as they have different emergent properties, they are ontically (ontologically) as well as analytically distinct
- Insofar as the social is discursively constituted and meaningful, it is cultural; insofar as the cultural is realized in/through social relations, it is social



## How to interpret this figure

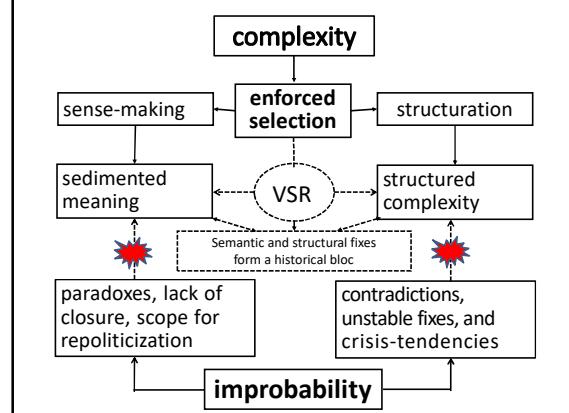
- Dotted diagonal line indicates:
  - all social relations are simultaneously semiotic and material;
  - 'semiosis' gets less important in movement from V through S to R
    - in part because semiosis becomes less contested, more sedimented;
  - 'materiality' gets more important in movement from V through S to R as unstructured complexity is reduced through limits on composable combinations of social relations
    - in part because governmental technologies normalize identities and conduct
- Positioning of balloons indicates:
  - overlap of successive stages of variation, selection, and retention
  - increased importance of materiality in this movement (understood as sedimentation of semiosis, structuration of social relations)
- Figure starts with moment of crisis (maximum variation) rather than with period of relative stability; it is heuristic, schematic



Four Selectivities		
Structural	Structurally-inscribed strategic selectivities plus structurally-oriented strategic calculation	Form analysis and critical institutionalism; focus on uneven distribution of constraints/opportunities
Discursive	Semiosis as enforced selection with signs as raw material of meaning making. Discursive selectivities plus strategic use of language	Critical semiotic analysis of text, intertext, and context to see how semiosis construes, guides action, and constructs
Technological	Technologies for appropriating and transforming nature and/or for the conduct of conduct	Material, social, and spatio-temporal biases inscribed in technological capacities for action and their effects
Agential	Attribution of interpretive and causal powers to agents to make a difference in specific conjuncture by virtue of specific capacities unique to them	Conjunctural analysis oriented to individual and social agents in a changing balance of forces

## Organic Economic Imaginaries

- An organic 'economic imaginary', i.e., one that has real chances of becoming hegemonic:
  - shapes economic strategies on broad range of economic, territorial, and social scales
  - addresses relation between market and non-market forces
  - informs state projects and hegemonic visions
  - removes political and social uncertainty
  - integrates private, institutional, and wider public narratives
- It also depends on 'organic intellectuals' (individual or collective), who articulate and promote its 'essential' unity (best understood in strategic essentialist terms)



## Conclusions

- Combine critical semiotic analysis with materialist analyses to develop an innovative CPE
- Evolutionary approach to critical semiotic analysis is productive, redirecting it beyond the immediate and personal to institutions, inter-institutional articulation, and complex social formations over time
- Materialist work is productive too, helping to explain differential selection and retention of some discourses and providing insight into specific institutional dynamics
- So seek to avoid the constructivist Charybdis and structuralist Scylla by combining semiotic and materialist analyses



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For further information, see:

- <http://www.bobjessop.org>
- <http://wp.lancs.ac.uk/cperc-conf/>
- The three books on the right

