



- Cultural
- Political
- Economy

Research Centre

**CPERC**

What does it mean to  
make a “cultural turn”  
in political economy?

# 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
- Validity vs correctness
- Criticisms of the cultural turn
- Some responses
- Conclusions



# Cultureal Political Economy - I

- CPE is a broad ‘post-disciplinary’ current (not a school and without ambition to become one) in institutional and evolutionary political economy
- It makes a '**cultural turn**' in economic and political studies in order to enhance their interpretive and explanatory power (the same 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*)

# Cultureal 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 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

# Varieties of Cultural Turn

- **Thematic**: intuition, hypothesis, or discovery that cultural phenomena (events, practices, processes, institutions, objects, policies, etc) belong to key themes of enquiry.
- **Methodological**: cultural aspects of social life provide a fruitful or even, indeed, the most productive entry point for exploring and explaining social world even if research later extends to other themes or explanatory factors.
- **Ontological**: culture is (co-)constitutive of social existence and must therefore be foundational aspect of any enquiry
- **Reflexive**: one or more types of cultural turn in social sciences themselves, making them object of analysis

Thematic	Methodological
Culture and subculture	Ideational
Everyday culture	Linguistic
Professional culture	Interpretive
Consumption and leisure	Narrative
Mass media	Rhetorical
Cyberculture	Argumentative
Body and embodiment	Translational
Haptics	Iconic
Identities	Visual
Desire	Constructivist
Memory	Performative
Cultural industries and policies	Post-Structural
Ethics	Practice
.....	.....

# Ontological Turns

- Ontological turn = (re-)discovery of the role of semiosis as a (co-)constitutive moment of all social relations
- Semiosis (sense- and meaning-making) is vital to actors' ability to 'go on' in the world: they are forced to reduce complexity by giving meaning to some of its aspects rather than others
- So we must treat semiosis as an essential ontic feature of social worlds – hence ontological – not as an optional 'add-on' or useful supplement to other kinds of analysis
- It must provide descriptions adequate at the level of meaning as well as at the level of (material) causation

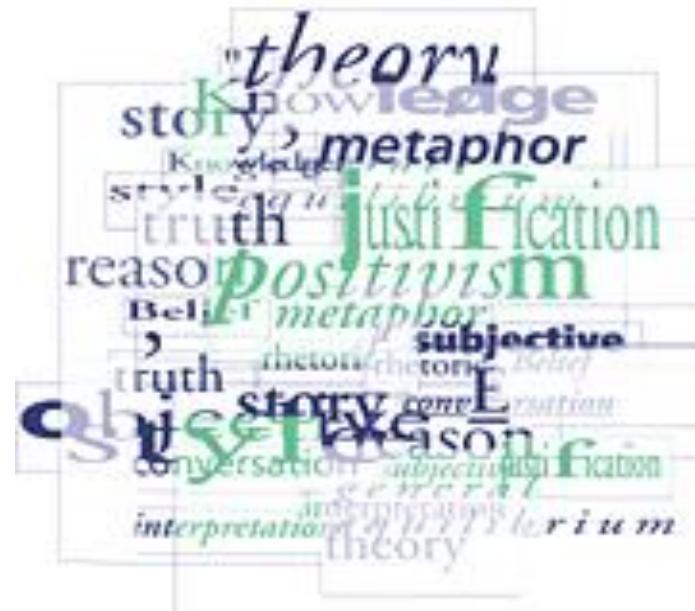
# Reflexive Turns

Cultural turns are applied to the social sciences themselves, making them an object of analysis. For example:

- Rhetoric of economic discourse
- Metaphors in political economy
- Marx's critique of classical and vulgar political economy
- Cold-War narratives in international relations
- Orientalism in area studies

## Knowledge and persuasion in economics

*Deirdre N. McCloskey*



# 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 central role in struggle 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 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 but creative products of semiotic *and material* practices with 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 *Herrschafskritik*

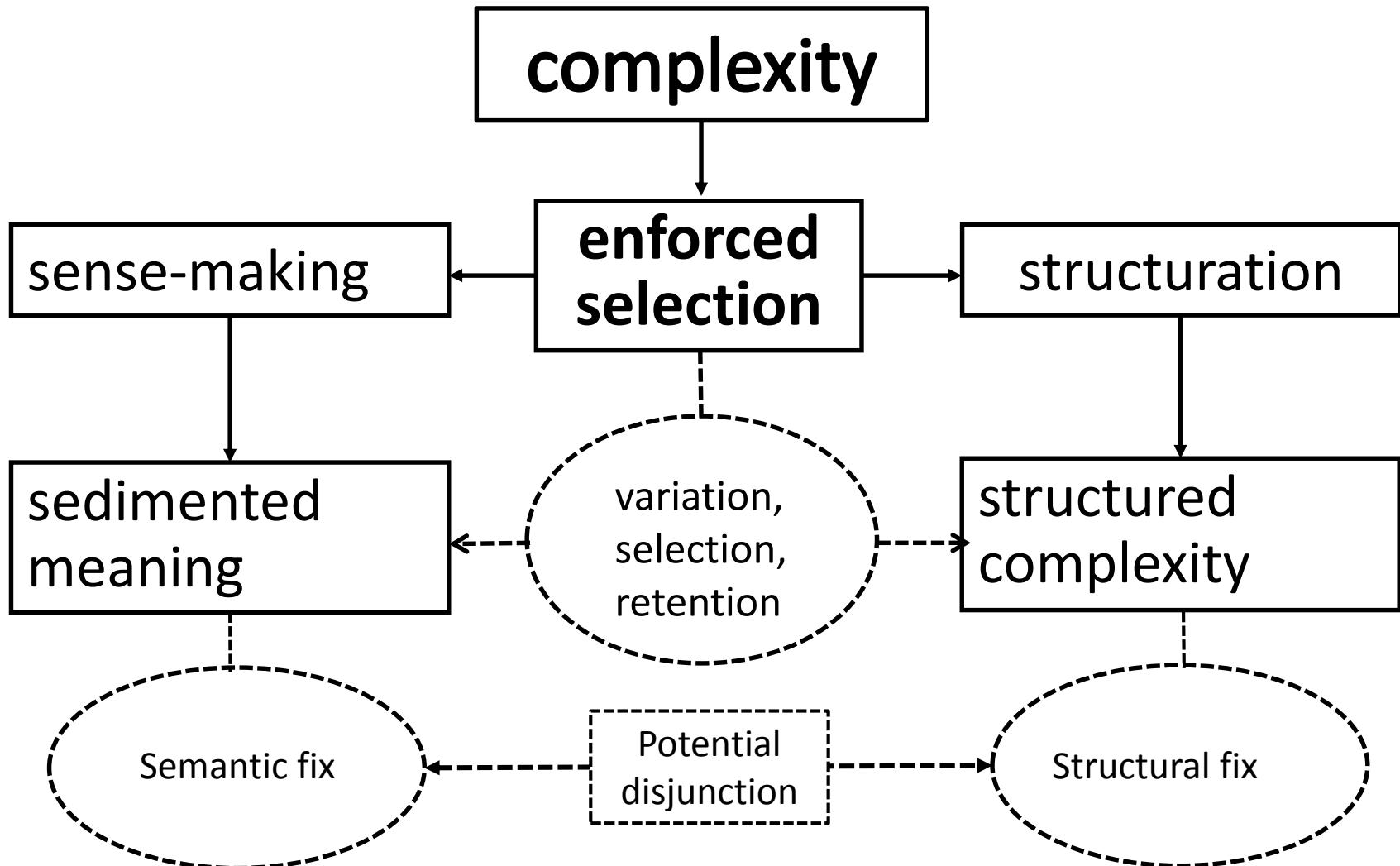
# Putting the ‘C’ into CPE - II

- 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



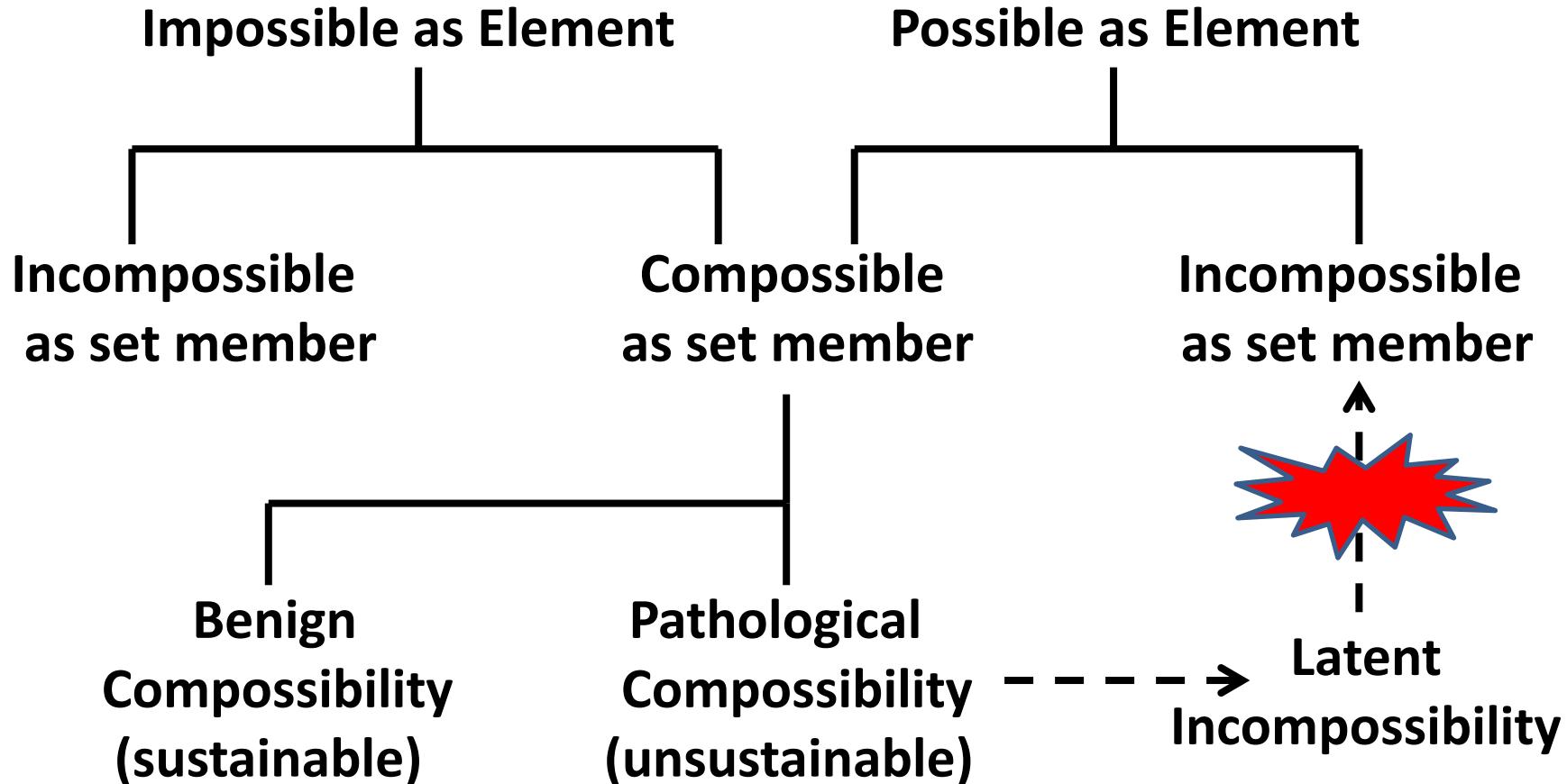


Depiction of the contribution of sense- and meaning-making and structuration (setting limits to compossible sets of social relations) to the relative stability of specific socio-institutional formations

# What is incompossibility...?

- Compossibility and incompossibility are key principles in natural theology and critical realism alike:  
**Not everything that is possible is *compossible***
- Compossibility: different (sets of) social relations do or could co-exist for a time in the same spatio-temporal matrix
- Incompossibility: (sets of) social relations that may exist independently of each other in *different* spatio-temporal matrices (based on theoretical first principles and/or on empirical observation) cannot co-exist in the *same* matrix
- Both concepts must be studied relationally and over time: allow for super- and subordination, complementarities, zones of indifference, compensating cycles within larger periods.....

# Modalities of Relational Compossibility



# How to interpret this figure

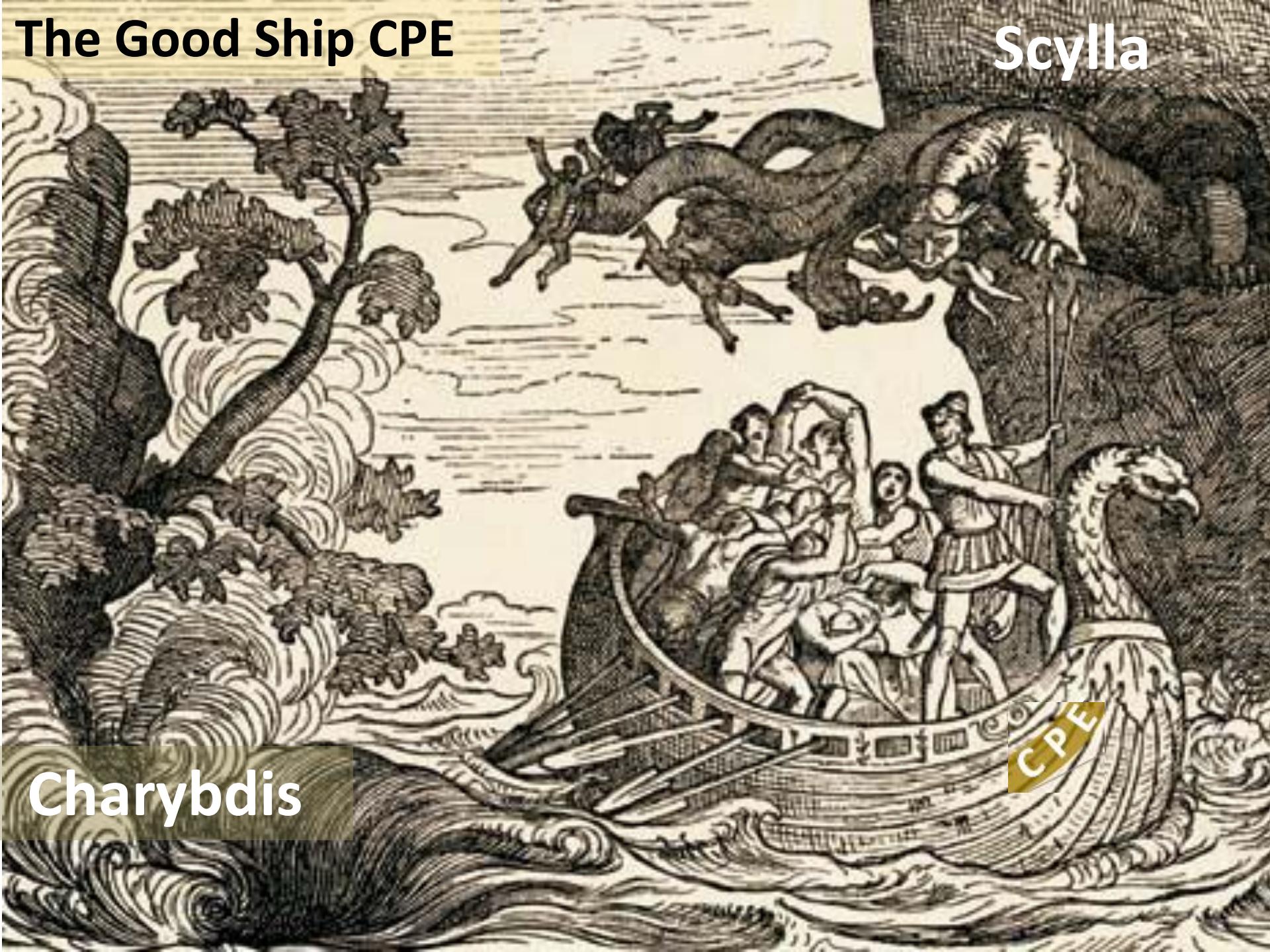
- *Not everything that is possible is compossible*
- A set of elements that are individually possible viewed *in isolation* and can be combined in a single possible world in a given spatio-temporal matrix are compossible in this regard (e.g., actually co-existing, relatively durable VoCs)
- A set of such elements that can't be combined in a single possible world in a given spatio-temporal matrix are *incompossible* in this regard (empty cells in VoC grid)
- Some compossible sets comprise mainly complementary elements and are stable/adaptive; others include major contradictory elements that are destabilizing in long run

# 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*

# The Good Ship CPE

Scylla



Charybdis

## Constructivist Charybdis

Grasps semiotic-material construction of social relations, reveals social embedding, notes its performative impact

## Structuralist Scylla

Grasps *distinctiveness* 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 *Träger* of economic logics

Strong risk of idealism, defining economic relations in terms of their manifest *semiotic content*

Strong risk of economic determinism, explaining economic processes in terms of '*iron laws*'

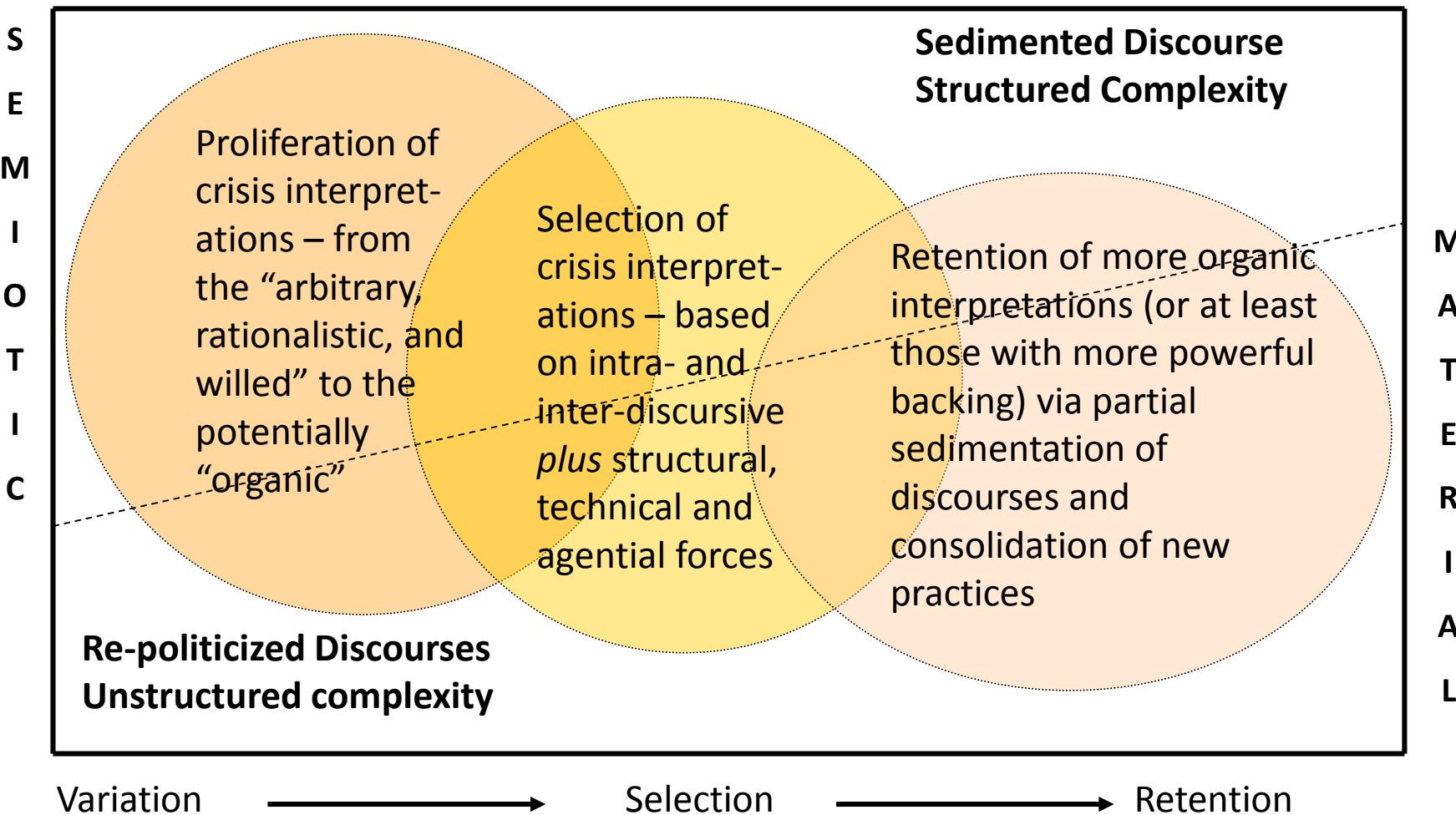
*“Soft Economic Sociology”*

*“Hard Political Economy”*

# 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

# Variation-Selection-Retention



# 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 compossible 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

# Selection of Imaginaries

- Selection (and retention) of imaginaries is shaped by at least four forms of selectivity:
  - *Discursive* selectivity (genre chains, styles, identities) and inter-discursive resonance, role of ‘situated pragmatics’ and capacities to make/break discursive links
  - *Social structural* selectivity: uneven distribution of opportunities to make a difference, some sites of enunciation are more dominant than others)
  - *Technical* selectivity: some means of advancing discourses and social transformation are more effective than others)
  - *Agential*: some agents are more skilled in discursive arts, have better strategic and tactical sense, are more able to organize support, neutralize opposition, ignore resistance

# 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
Techno-logical	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

# Construals: true or correct?

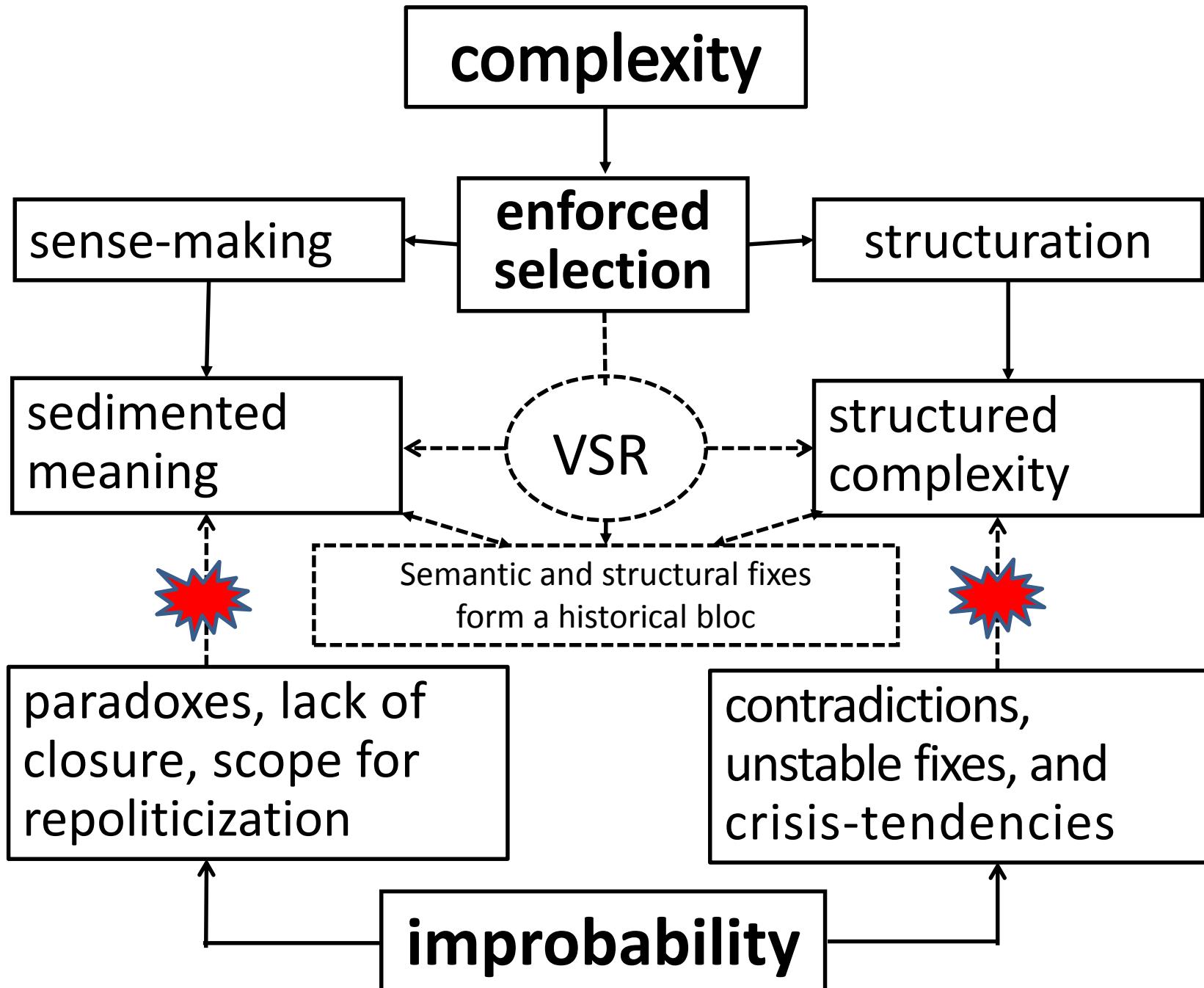
- Construals can be assessed in terms of **scientific validity**:
  - note risk that scientific inquiries are distorted by scientists' own ideological assumptions (economics is one of many examples)
  - note that theoretical paradigms differ from policy paradigms
- Construals can also be assessed in terms of **correctness**, i.e., capacity to transform conjunctural potentials into reality by guiding action (construal leads to construction). This depends on:
  - limits set by objectively overdetermined form of conjuncture
  - interpretive and mobilizing power of strategic perspectives
  - balance of forces associated with different construals

# “Correct construals”

- Initial *variation* of construals does not imply free choice among many interpretations that may be equally correct
- ‘Arbitrary, rationalistic, and willed’ construals versus ‘organic’ or ‘correct’ construals, i.e., construals adequate to given conjuncture and readily communicated to relevant audience
- What is ‘correct’ organically (construal) and chronologically (being first to resonate and/or to impose agreed reading) matters more in *selection* than ‘scientific truth’
- A ‘correct’ reading creates ‘truth-effects’ and may then be *retained* through its capacity to shape reality
- This is a recursive and inevitably contested process

# 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)





# Some Criticisms

- Chaotic conception
- Reification
- Dematerialization
- Decorative turn
- Uncritical turn
- Crypto-capitalist turn
- Another form of economism
- And some CPE responses

# Don Mitchell on Chaotic Concepts

‘it is strikingly rare ... for empirical studies to actually operationalize any of the myriad definitions of culture that have been offered in recent years. Instead of a specification and development of culture, showing how it works in society, we find a proliferation of examples that presumably constitute culture: everyday life, works of art, political resistance, economic formations, religious beliefs, styles of clothing, eating habits, ideologies, ideas, literature, music, popular media, and so on. **Culture seems to be little more than a list of activities that the analyst has deemed “cultural”**’ (Mitchell 2000: 73).

# Hagopian on Semantic Embarrassment

A serious problem arises if the ready availability of such a labile term as culture too conveniently substitutes it for the hard work of drawing, rather than implying or assuming, connections among ways of seeing, modes of expression, ethnic or group identities, traditions, ways of life, and emotional or intellectual dispositions. ... [T]he overuse of an under-theorised term may preclude the rigorous examination of some of the most challenging problems in history – say, for example, that of causation. .... *Culture's* capacity to subsume all the things we might want to link together may make it an attractive term for the same reason that it is a deeply problematic one

# Don Mitchell on De-Materialization

‘with its multi-faceted concern with (and some would say uncritical wonder at) all matters cultural, and its retreat from studies of economic systems and processes of exploitation, coming as it did just as the political and economic right gained ascendancy – as marking a rather complete surrender to the forces of reaction [it amounts to] a squandering of intellectual resources. Like cultural studies as a whole, it also represents a retreat from the sorts of concerns that animated Williams’s cultural materialism, which explicitly sought, after all, to theorize the indissolubility of ‘culture’, ‘politics’, ‘economy’, and so on’ (Mitchell 2000: 59-60).

# Rojek & Turner on Decorative Turns

- 'Culture' has eclipsed the 'social', and literary interpretation has marginalized sociological methods. **'Decorative sociology' is a branch of modernist aesthetics devoted above all to a politicized, textual reading of society and culture**
- In stressing its aesthetic dimension, we reject the political self-image of decorative sociology as a political intervention.
- While the cultural turn has helped to revise approaches to the relationships between identity and power, race and class, ideology and representation, it has done so chiefly at an aesthetic level. ... [But] the 'aestheticization of life' has not translated fully into the politicization of culture (2001).

# Sayer (2000) on Uncritical Turns

- Cultural turn risks “a shift from vulgar materialism to a 'vulgar culturalism' that is as dismissive of, or reductive about, the economy as vulgar materialism was about culture.
- If cultural studies looks at signifying practices, anything society registers has a cultural dimension as it signifies something. But social life is not reducible to texts or text-like objects, whose signifying qualities are all that matter
- Fear of 'normativity' blocks criticism of the aestheticisation of moral-political values, 'de-moralisation' and depoliticisation in modern society, and disqualifies contrasts like use-value and exchange-value, substance/appearance, necessary to critique

# Sewell on Crypto-Capitalism

- Cultural turn was also fuelled, in ways we were unaware of, by a secret affinity with an emergent logic of capitalist development.
- Cultural history's tendency to celebrate the plasticity of all social forms made political sense as a critique of Fordism as well as the entrenched social determinisms of gender and race.
- Such a celebration reveals **unacknowledged and troubling complicity between the cultural turn and the emergence of new forms of flexible accumulation in contemporary capitalism**
- Cultural history's lack of interest in, indeed effective denial of, socio-economic determinations .. [is] potentially disabling in an era when they are so clearly at work in the world (2005: 201).

# Larry Grossberg on Economism

Political economy cannot realize potential of cultural turn due to its economicistic bias. So students of culture should

- engage with economics as a discipline, not just with a few preferred theorists or schools;
- address the concrete complexities of economic life, relations and discourses: pure theory cannot analyze economic contexts
- collaborate across disciplines
- not unreflectively privilege certain forms of academic knowledge and its production

# A CPE Response to Grossberg

- CPE engages with cultural studies as a whole, not just with one preferred theorist or school
- CPE addresses the complexities of semiosis and explores the discursive and non-discursive mechanisms that shape how ‘ideas matter’ in PE rather than merely asserting this or using narratives – the four selectivities
- CPE works in a trans- or post-disciplinary way rather than in ‘multi-disciplinary’ teams
- CPE studies not only academic knowledge (production) but also everyday economic imaginaries and struggles

# Conclusions



- Combine critical semiotic analysis with materialist analyses to develop an innovative CPE
- Evolutionary approach to CSA is productive, redirecting it beyond immediate and personal to institutions, inter-institutional articulation, and complex social formations over time
- Materialist analyses are productive too, helping to explain differential selection and retention of some discourses and providing insight into specific institutional dynamics



# Acknowledgments

Research for our individual and joint work on CPE was supported by:

- Economic & Social Research Council
- EU-COST-Action
- Rosa Luxemburg Foundation
- The British Academy
- The Institute for Advanced Studies, Lancaster University

For further information, see:

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

