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Book Review: Economy, Culture and Society: A Sociological Critique of Neo-liberalism

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Economy, Culture and Society: A Sociological Critique of Neo-liberalism, by Barry Smart, 2003. Buckingham/Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press, Theorising Society Series. ISBN: 0335209106. US\$26.95 (paperback), ix + 188pp.

Reviewed by Yves Laberge, Institut Québécois des Hautes Etudes Internationales, Québec City, Canada

Barry Smart's newest book is at the intersection of economical sociology, consumer research and social theory. The objective of his study is to analyse some emerging contexts and the recent major shifts in the economic life when observing the implications of late capitalism, in terms of cultural and social dimensions. New trends appear now and then, social structure changes, and sociologists have to adapt their understanding accordingly to each emerging phenomena. To achieve that account, Barry Smart begins the first chapter by a review of some classical analysts in order to find their understanding of economy in society; he revisits Marx, Simmel, Durkheim, Weber and (to a lesser degree) Talcott Parsons. Respectfully, the author acknowledges that those founding fathers were then thinking and theorizing in terms such as production, exchanges, conflicts between classes and social groups. But we must recognize that in most cases the pre-First World War theories about society urgently need some updating when facing new challenges and issues of the new 21st century.

Chapter 2 raises some of those questions with theoretical insight and various examples. For instance, from an economical perspective, should we adopt Friedrich Hayek's celebration of the values of a self-regulated free-market, or rely on Karl Polanyi's accurate critique of the profit-maximizing economics from 1944? (p. 28).

The basic assumption of this book is to show how our understanding of economy needs to create new ways of seeing the links between economy and culture, as we can see in the second half of the study. During the last 20 years or so, social theorists have raised innovative concepts like the 'cultural turn' and the 'culture of consumption' (Chapter 3). Nowadays, contemporary sociologists such as Pierre Bourdieu, Zygmunt Bauman, George Ritzer, Manuel Castells, Douglas Kellner have put these older issues (bureaucracy, Fordist standardization) in newer conceptual frameworks and concepts such as domination (according to Bourdieu), consumer society (Baudrillard, Bauman), McDonaldization (taken from Ritzer's neologism on rationalization), Castells's network society, all parts of the neoliberal era that brings different social problems with new forms of conflicts, inequalities, exclusions, and outcasts (p. 50). Others emerging concepts such as 'identities' and 'cultural meanings' have been integrated as well and have become crucial elements for both marketers and sociologists, in order to understand the way consumers choose what they want when selecting a branded product such as the ones made by Nike, Swatch, Ikea, Gap, Body Shop or Coca-Cola (p. 73). But this increasing

instrumentation that commodifies the production also brings unwanted effects. For instance, taking from Greg Philo and David Miller's edited book about the limits of the free market (*Market Killing*, 2001), Smart explains that the consumers' choices are made artificially, but those decisions are also limited, according to a pre-selection of products made by other intermediaries, giving only partial information about products and limited access to specific types of shops and limitations of resources (p. 75). Those outsiders who are excluded from the consuming process are not poor anymore, but they are ranked within the category of the 'non-consumers', as Zygmunt Bauman says (p. 51). Taking from Bourdieu and Bauman, the fifth chapter calls for a strong commitment towards public interest and a belief in an ethical approach: global capitalism is not unavoidable and the 'laws of the market' are not fate or destiny, but only imposed by those who control the economical system as it is (p. 150). The conclusion of the book remains optimistic: we can still escape from economics and from the laws of the market (p. 173).

I liked most of that book. However, one thing struck me as frustrating. In the many references to earlier sociologists' works, Smart used (as many other scholars do) the year of the recent version of the book that he quoted or referred to the English translation he used: he mentions Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* from 1976 (p. 20), Durkheim's *The Division of Labour in Society* from 1978 (p. 15), etc. We all know, including Smart himself, that these works were published much earlier, but this method of referencing is in this case puzzling, since we compare the evolution of the sociological thought through the 20th century, and the adding of the real year of the original publication in brackets would have been helpful, specially for students, in the text or at least in the final bibliography. Apart from that editing detail, *Economy, Culture and Society: A Sociological Critique of Neo-liberalism* remains a fine contribution that often provides a rich understanding of today's social theory in economic sociology. As proven in his tremendous *Handbook of Social Theory* from 2001 (co-edited with George Ritzer), it is clear that Barry Smart knows very well his field, and his insightful book will be instructive for sociologists and economists as well.

Globalizing Women: Transnational Feminist Networks, by Valentine M. Moghadam, 2005. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press. ISBN: 0801880246. US\$18.95 (paperback), 272pp.

Reviewed by Carol Mueller, Arizona State University at West Campus, USA

Valentine Moghadam is a knowledgeable authority on women's transnational mobilization. Born in Iran and educated in North America, she is not only