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The Cultural Return by Susan Hegeman, FlashPoints, book 7. Oakland: University of California Press, 2012. Pp. 204. $55.00 paper.

When the unique destiny and fragility of *British culture* can be invoked to justify anti-immigration policies or creationism defended with a view to protecting organic cultural variety it would appear that something has transpired in the valence of the concept of culture such that an earlier oppositional content—found, for example, in Franz Boas or Raymond Williams and avowedly antiracist and counterhegemonic in tone—has been definitively forgotten or lost. Susan Hegeman's new book, *The Cultural Return*, takes as its object the complex associational fate of culture in an age in which it is as much the prerogative of oppressed minorities as it is that of majoritarian hegemony itself. Though her analysis extends beyond the aforementioned case, craning (sometimes awkwardly) across disciplines to shake out and taxonomize the diverse connotations and usages of culture, her general (and very useful) thesis is that the social sciences and humanities have shelved the heuristic value of culture at precisely the height of its popular and political purchase. This may, she suggests, have significant consequences for the way we politically model relations between past, present, and future.

According to Hegeman, the "repudiation of culture" is a "transdisciplinary phenomenon," one that stands to become, or already has,

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a full-fledged academic zeitgeist. This is the intellectual tendency that "best represents our current perceived moment of intellectual rupture with the recent past" (7). The word "culture" in this formulation functions as a shorthand for what Fredric Jameson (among others) has called the "cultural turn," that shift, first registered in the 1980s and 1990s in the Anglo-American academe, which saw the birth of movement disciplines like Cultural Studies and the New Historicism, but which also triggered existential crises in established fields like literary studies, art history, and philosophy. The injunction to *context* enacted by the new concept of culture—political and historical factors often methodologically bracketed by these fields—dragged back into the domain of everyday practices and relations objects long sequestered by the requirements of disciplinary reproduction and *vanitas*. This was experienced by many working within these fields as blunt-force personal trauma, a displacing encounter with their own specialized limits and competencies, but also a painful invalidation of basic disciplinary pleasure, the love of one's object—whether it be literature or art—which drew so many researchers to these fields in the first place.

Conflict within and between disciplines then spilled over into highly sensationalized media narratives about the despoliation of knowledge and art by politics; according to evangelical church groups and conservative pundits, tenured atheists and feminists were undertaking a war against American values and against the (cultural) civic religion required to prevent society from devolving into moral and economic chaos. Though its place in the university was always precarious and often directly contested by a whole array of skeptics ranging from professors of business to parents frustrated at the politicization of the classroom, the basic postulates of Cultural Studies—the historicity of culture, its vital role in the production and reproduction of subjects, the idea of culture as a site of social struggle over values, as well as politically precious images of the future—found their way into the bloodstream of the humanities and social sciences in subtle, but impacting ways. The basic heuristic potential of culture was effectively indisputable.

Hegeman believes that the ground on which this consensus was established is now beginning to erode. She argues that the last ten years have seen a theoretical shift away from the centrality of culture towards a whole host of new universalities and truths—a shift, in other words, away from mediation, context, and politics and towards immanence, texts, and ethics. In literature, this has expressed itself in calls to a return to aesthetics and to the study of the formal

intricacy and structure of literary works. This is framed in the same language used to describe market corrections, a kind of natural equilibrium reached in the aftermath of effervescence and bubble think; if two decades of cultural analysis have compromised the specificity of literature, reducing it to mere content, the time has come to return to the classical preeminence of form and the lucid specificity of the literary object. In film, says Hegeman, similar patterns have been discerned, with calls to reactivate the simple affective pleasures of moviegoing, to free the experience from its capture by theory, and to recalibrate the filmic on its own terms (i.e., away from politics, culture, etc.).

Across the humanities, in disciplines like philosophy and theology, she also points to the resurgence of ethics as a symptom of registering this turning away from culture. The study of ethics, in philosophy for example, has the advantage of providing the field with a sense of engagement or proximity to the practical without risking the overt (essentially Marxist) politicizations of Cultural Studies. Where the latter invokes the indispensability of critique to democracy, a linkage which requires teaching students to uncomfortably think against the grain of their own common sense and which leaves the discipline (and its professors) open to charges of brainwashing and bias, ethics drapes itself in the immediacy of seemingly universal moral conundrums, questions of personalized comportment that a classroom can imaginatively dissect without falling into the tense space of highly polarized political difference. The subtext, here, is that ethics is open and tolerant, simultaneously concrete and available to all, whereas politics closes down discussions via its proximity to antiquated divisions and abstractions, a universality completely at odds with the small vital moral puzzles that actually make up our lives.

One of the most important contentions of Hegeman's book is that this repudiation of (politicized) culture can be traced directly to the disciplinary atmospherics of the neoliberal university. The technocratic administrative culture produced by austerity is such that departments in the humanities and social sciences are now regularly called upon to demonstrate their value in terms that can be translated into the language of economic profit and utility. This can work to quietly discourage the creation of interdisciplinary departments and projects of the kind usually proliferated by the cultural turn; the newness and uncategorizability of women's studies, posthumanism, globalization studies, and digital humanities often strike the technocrat's ear as mere verbiage or outright obfuscation. Indeed, Hegeman suggests that the new

emphasis on aesthetics, ethics, close reading, etc., might itself be another of austerity's many trickle-down effects, in that professors worried about job security and even the continuing existence of their faculties are being encouraged to retrench their disciplines around familiar, classically intelligible objects and methods and to produce research results compatible with the liberal humanist palates of administrators.

The twentieth century has seen a remarkable dilation and expansion of the word *culture* even as its signification has taken on more modest dimensions. Where culture once evoked impressions of Napoleonic nationalist *Bildung* (education), the simultaneously open and limited domain of struggling Hegelian *Geist* (spirit), it today indicates instead the active sameness that subtends any group or collective irrespective of scale or greatness. Hockey, science, and celebrity all have their own cultures, their own self-reproducing metabolism or structured repetition. According to Hegeman, the resignification of the word and its appearance in a bewildering array of new contexts has imbued it with novel pedagogical and political powers. When we speak, for example, of a culture of rape in sport or of the short-termist culture of finance, we discover a very succinct way of undercutting the usual habit of dressing up systemic violence and error in the idiosyncratic particularity of exception: in a flash, we are furnished with a fully operational concept of *structure*, one that at the same time manages to avoid the bad old specters of determinism and holism with which the latter is often associated. Hegeman thinks the concept of culture is unique precisely insofar as it continues to conserve this capacity to elegantly mediate "between part and whole," "between the universal and the particular" (58).

Hegeman's conception of culture takes seriously its post-structuralist detractors, for whom it presumes a homogeneity and oneness constitutively inimical to difference. She concedes culture's internal complexity and the fragmented or composite quality of its oneness, however, without triggering the full demobilization of the word so often proposed by those for whom its Hegelian (originally Herderian) echoes are too strong. She's also clear that it cannot be allowed to masquerade as a quietly racist essentialism, the kind of gesture made by neoconservatives in their attempt to naturalize (racialized) poverty as an effect of entrenched cultural habit and identity. The culture of poverty, here, when used to clarify racialized inequality in America often instantly hypostatizes a whole host of middle-class fantasies about "things black people do" (single-parenting, drugs, etc.). These misconstruals of culture work precisely because they have disentangled themselves from

the self-implicating complicities of history; they open the door to an historical materialist insistence on the (always constrained and dialectical) autoproduction of human communities only to slam it shut, re-enclosing reality via the comforting familiarity of cultural sameness and incorrigibility.

Hegeman is clear that the value of the concept of culture is questionable if the concept is not placed into a continual feedback loop with the dynamics of political economy. Rather than endlessly decrying the putative homogenizations of globalization—the McDonaldization of local flavors and pleasures—she suggests we should instead—following Naomi Klein—heed the *McDonaldization of government* that subtends and proliferates the corporatization of culture in the first place. This is an important point: one of the great public relations victories of neoliberalism has been its capacity to dress itself up in a dream coat of ontological variety and difference. Juxtaposed with the bad monotony and top–down paternalism of the welfare state—gray council housing, queues for food stamps, the workerist feel of unions—neoliberalism has piggybacked on the design ambience of tech companies like Apple to mask its own radical rejection of complexity, its insistence, time and time again, on a one-size-fits-all model of governance and life. This is a governmentality, moreover, that has unleashed the conditions for the complete subsumption of culture by the commodity form and exchange relations. What needs to be consistently kept in mind, in other words, is that *government itself is culture*, one that presides over—even when doing so negatively via deregulation—the continuous, real-time economization of existence.

One paradoxical advantage of this subsumption is that it has become increasingly impossible to deny the interpenetration of culture and economics long hypothesized by the likes of Raymond Williams and Fredric Jameson (both of whom continuously whir around in the background of Hegeman's method and style). Calls, then, to fix or tweak the excesses of microcultures—the cultures, for example, of Washington or medicine—apart from an eye to their systemic embedment in an order grounded in commodity exchange and profit become less and less credible. In such a context, the translational flexibility of culture becomes indispensable. "Culture forces us," says Hegeman, to think about . . . the relationship between the worlds we inhabit and our loftiest hopes . . . . Very few concepts force us into the embarrassments of recognizing the limits of our own impoverished imaginations" (17). A culture inseparable from economics is one that when called upon to imagine its way out of specific or sectoral

limits and aporias has the double function of requiring us to simultaneously reimagine the whole itself. It does not harbor the existential separateness it may have in the era of Romantic nationalisms, but it nevertheless has critically utopian political remainders and possibilities.

Hegeman closes her book by reflecting on the ways the theoretical repudiation of culture might effect indigenous rights movements, many of which are increasingly articulated in the language of cultural recognition. These projects are important and powerful, suggests Hegeman, precisely because they refuse from the very beginning the easy liberal (or classically Marxist) opposition between culture and economics. This is understandable for anyone familiar with the indigenous movements in Bolivia or Ecuador, where resistance occurs in the context of Left statist projects intuited by these groups as still too close to the industrialist productivism of their liberal predecessors. Hegeman, however, is fully aware of those instances in which these movements themselves are still caught up in varieties of economism or reduced to projects of administrative (state) recognition and inclusion. Rather than moralize the situation from the outside, Hegeman's quiet objective is simply to encourage us to pause before we dispense entirely with the theoretical equipment provided by the concept of culture in all of its myriad globalized entanglements and contexts. Her book is a well-researched repository of twentieth-century conceptions of culture that is extremely useful for someone looking for the wider historical context in which Anglo-American Cultural Studies appeared. She makes no claims to radical novelty or innovation, here, but instead explicitly frames her work as a modest inducement to (and transdisciplinary survey of) the still-unexhausted resources of cultural thinking. Understood as such, the book should be read closely.

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