



# Towards a cultural political economy of the illicit



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## Abstract

This article intervenes in debates on the illicit in economic geography, notably in the tensions between cultural and political economic approaches. First, it assesses critiques of political economic evaluations of the illicit. It then offers a ‘trading zone’, drawing upon both cultural and political economy, and argues that the two economic epistemologies are complementary, not mutually exclusive. The article instates political and ecological missing links in cultural political economy to foster multidimensional analyses of illicit practices in discursive, material and ecological registers. It concludes by discussing the broader implications of a cultural political economy of the illicit for economic geography.

## Keywords

cultural political economy, engaged pluralism, illegality, illicit, informality, political ecology, uneven development

## Introduction

Illicit practices are often to be found behind closed doors as a constitutive element of economic processes. Bribes, tax evasion, criminal operations, corporate profit shifting, money laundering and other illegal activities are estimated to account for trillions of dollars annually worldwide (OECD, 2014). However, this topic remains relatively marginal within economic geography today (Hudson, 2018). Partly due to past critiques of the geography of crime (Peet, 1975), the vast majority of the work investigating the illicit has thrived outside the boundaries of economic geography (Hall, 2010; LeBeau and Leitner, 2011). This situation is somehow surprising, not only because of its empirical relevance but also for the significant theoretical implications that this rubric has for critical economic thinking. Illicit economies cover a broad range of scales, from global crime (Hall, 2018;

Madsen, 2009) to everyday practices of urban survival (Ghiabi, 2018; Hubbard, 2019; Inverardi-Ferri, 2018b). Similarly, the emergence of organizationally fragmented and geographically dispersed production networks (Yeung and Coe, 2015) has widened the space for illegality (Gregson and Crang, 2016). This fact calls into question conventional narratives on the economic, with the illicit offering a different map of globalization (Palan et al., 2013; Zook, 2003), and opens up possibilities for a profitable reengagement with main categories, such as production, circulation, consumption and social reproduction, in economic geography.

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In recent years, a renewed interest has arisen on the theme from different perspectives within geography. While literature on diverse economies has shown how capitalist processes are articulated in a variety of economic activities, also pertaining to the multiple space-times of the informal and the illicit (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Smith and Stenning, 2006), scholarship on disarticulation has highlighted the way violence underpins mechanisms of value production and accumulation (Alford et al., 2019; Bair and Werner, 2011; McGrath, 2018; Werner, 2018). By now, illicit activities are recognized to be inherently connected to capitalist dynamics (Hudson, 2018), to play a central role in geographical processes (Hall, 2012) and to participate in the uneven development of cities and regions (Chiodelli et al., 2018). Political economy has been the dominant paradigm of this scattered subfield, providing key contributions that raised broader questions on the relationship between the illicit and the dynamics of capitalism. Within this context, a relatively recent intervention by Gregson and Crang (2016) has aimed to reorient the field towards cultural economy perspectives on the basis that geography would benefit from investigating the illicit at the intersection of the moral economy, customary illegality and circulation.

According to Gregson and Crang, economic geographers have tended to conflate the illicit with the illegal and have provided a dichotomous description of markets, examining the theme only in 'limited ways' and finding themselves in a theoretical and empirical 'impasse' (2016: 1). The authors suggest, therefore, that research on the illicit should make 'a shift in conceptual perspective, away from the political economy-based toolkit of economic geography, and towards the possibilities of cultural economy' (2016: 12). Accompanying their critique, Gregson and Crang (2016) provide a reconceptualization of the illicit as a transient quality of circulation and introduce the notion of 'customary illegality'. While the authors' claim that the

study of the illicit can benefit from cultural economy perspectives is helpful, this article suggests that different epistemologies are complementary rather than mutually exclusive and should be retained (Hudson, 2004). Political economy has much to offer in the analysis of material processes and power relations underpinning illicit activities, and it would be detrimental for this emerging subfield to move away from it.

In this vein, the article offers a cultural political economy framework as a potential trading zone between different approaches to the illicit. This move does not want to subsume distant positions within a new monism. Instead, it promotes dialogue and takes an engaged pluralist stance, suggesting that productive 'trading zones' can '[catalyze] new understandings and possibilities' (Barnes and Sheppard, 2010: 195). Here, it should be said from the outset that most scholars working on the illicit are attentive to semiotic dimensions and many cultural elements are inherently embedded within most of the scholarship already produced. As such, the article tries to make these implicit elements visible and attempts to move discussions towards a different appreciation of these components. As pointed out by Martin Jones (2008: 393), the point is not that cultural political economy introduces new elements, 'but the way the components made visible by CPE interact and relate to each other'. Further, the article integrates a 'geographical sensibility' within the cultural political economy perspective, reflecting on several critiques that have been addressed to the framework, in particular relating to the 'political' and the 'ecological' missing links (Hudson, 2008; Jones, 2008). This is done to tune cultural political economy towards a profitable study of the illicit, concurrently opening up new areas of interest for the field. As such, the article develops a nuanced version of CPE that holds together registers relating to discursive, material and ecological dimensions, enabling multi-dimensional and multiscalar analyses. In so

doing, it offers an original geographical perspective to investigate the illicit, how it is socially produced and how this process in turn contributes to replicating capitalist social relationships in space and time.

In fact, the recent turn to the illicit within economic geography reflects both an empirical and theoretical concern that pertains to questions of difference within capitalism (Peck, 2016). Moving beyond contrasting binaries (e.g. legal/illegal, formal/informal), the economic geographies of the illicit contribute to theories of heterogeneity (Gidwani and Wainwright, 2014). The remainder of the article first outlines the intervention of Gregson and Crang (2016). Subsequently, it elaborates a broad-brush summary of key contributions in the economic geographies of the illicit to provide the background against which their critique has emerged, and evaluates their arguments vis-à-vis this scholarship. Here a caveat is necessary. Rather than reviewing the literature on the illicit in its entirety, the article limits its scope to illicit economies. While this appears a more feasible project, selecting the works relating to the 'economic' remains arbitrary. Different choices could have been made. Then, the article moves on to elaborate on a cultural political economy approach and by way of illustration provides a brief operationalization of the framework. Finally, conclusions assess the broader implications of cultural political economy for developing a renewed research agenda on the illicit.

## The Illicit and Political Economy

Economic sociology, economic anthropology, criminal studies and other branches of critical social sciences have made the illicit a central concern for studying the governance of the global economy and its uneven contours (Beckert and Wehinger, 2012; Bhattacharyya, 2005; Gootenberg, 2008; Nordstrom, 2007; Phoenix and Oerton, 2013). However, within geography

the picture is less defined. While some original strands of research have always highlighted the variegated dimensions of the economic (Berndt, 2018; Gibson-Graham, 2006; Peck and Theodore, 2007; Smith, 2010; Smith and Stenning, 2006), Hudson (2019) notes that certain economic geographical scholarship has tended to overemphasize analyses of the formal legal economy in explanations of uneven development. Traditionally, this accent has considered the political economy of uneven development as the result of geographical and organizational shifts that the decline of Fordism has stimulated in the world market since the late 1970s (Rossi, 2017; Sheppard, 2019). As the argument goes, in the last few decades, driven by the capitalist dynamics of cost, flexibility and speed, companies have undergone a significant restructuring of their manufacturing processes (Coe and Yeung, 2015). They have relocated segments of production to those emerging economies that could provide considerable labour supply and profit maximization (Peck, 2017), engendering, in turn, uneven regional development trajectories.

This account implies that most economic actors operate within the boundaries of the formal economy and according to its rules, often playing down the role of alternative practices in subsidizing global capitalism (Nagar et al., 2002). Similarly, this narrative often neglects how business decisions are not only informed by the competitive advantage that minimum regulatory frameworks can offer economic actors but also by the degree of tolerance of particular legal systems vis-à-vis illicit behaviours (Andrijasevic and Sacchetto, 2016). As an example, the possibility to derogate from labour laws and allow excessive working hours makes some areas of the world more attractive than others (Hudson, 2018). As such, recent years have seen a growing body of economic geographical scholarship on the illicit that has tried to fill this gap. There is a broader recognition that investigating this theme is useful for understanding how processes of uneven

development unfold in the contemporary global economy more broadly, with many activities being hybrid outcomes of both licit and illicit behaviours, making it challenging to draw clear definitions of what the legal/illegal economy is.

Within this context, a central methodological question concerns, therefore, what accounts for the illicit and how this should be studied. Far from being a merely theoretical problem, different conceptualizations have critical practical and political implications, involving alternative forms of inquiry and analysis. In particular, these relate to understandings of the illicit either as a fundamental trait of contemporary capitalism or instead as one of its contingent elements (Sayer, 2000). Political economy has traditionally made abstraction of lifeworld elements (i.e. aspects of life that are the product of embodied actors and their cultures) to focus on systemic processes (i.e. formal organizational logics that go beyond actors' experiences) (Sayer, 2001). In contrast, cultural economy has usually reversed the equation (Sayer, 2001). The illicit, however, encompassing both individual dimensions and collective practices, is a porous concept that eludes clear-cut definitions and cannot be easily categorized either as a system mechanism or as a lifeworld phenomenon.

While it appears a tautology to relate illegality to the legislation of a given institutional space, scholars have suggested that the illicit encompasses more nuanced understandings of human activities, including those behaviours that may be legal but unethical as well as those that are illegal but socially accepted (Gregson and Crang, 2016). For instance, while some economic practices, such as gambling or financial speculation, could be *de jure* licit, they may nevertheless be considered unethical. At the same time, some activities that are sanctioned by law are *de facto* permitted in particular places (Tellman et al., 2020). The latter is the case of the informal economy (Behzadi, 2019; Tucker and Devlin, 2019). Illegal activities, such as the trade of counterfeit goods, may be

tolerated by governments as a necessary means of survival for poorer social groups. While some actors may elude taxation or employ workers under illegal labour conditions, these behaviours might be seen as morally licit (Olson, 2018) and even promoted as a way to control social unrest in some regions of the world (Briassoulis, 1999).

In this regard, Gregson and Crang (2016) have advanced a sharp critique of most research on the subject, taking issue with existing accounts and definitions. They have suggested that economic geographers have tended to conflate the illicit with the illegal, associating it with particular spaces, objects and actors. According to the authors, this stance has reinforced Northern centric preconceptions and confined the illicit to practices carried out by 'dodgy people doing dodgy things with dodgy goods in dodgy places' (Gregson and Crang, 2016: 208). Instead, they suggest that the illicit is often situated at the intersection of moral economies, illegality and customs. This move enables the authors to shift their attention away from marginal places to focus on habits, customs and norms, deploying their preferred theoretical perspective, namely cultural economy (Gregson and Crang, 2016). As such, they propose to reorient geographical research away from a territorial understanding of the illicit and towards those activities that, despite being illegal, are nevertheless socially accepted and therefore licit. A central idea in the authors' critique is that illicitness appears in the global economy as a transient quality of circulation, rather than a property of specific goods. They suggest that it is in the practices of logistics, which move goods across borders and between regulatory systems, that opportunities for illegal behaviours are to be found (Gregson and Crang, 2016). As such, they observe that when we make visible fraudulent practices of trade and circulation, it becomes also evident that previous research has given too little attention to the cultural dimensions of the illicit. The authors

conclude their intervention pointing out that ‘there is a need for economic geography to shift its gaze, [...] away from the political economy-based toolkit of economic geography, and towards the possibilities of cultural economy’ (2016: 12).

The critique developed by Gregson and Crang (2016) shows that cultural economy is a useful tool, particularly in conjunction with the focus on circulation. Their intervention provides, therefore, a productive corrective to previous works that have conflated the illicit with the illegal. However, it would be detrimental for the field to move away from political economy altogether, as advocated in their concluding paragraph. Political economy has much to contribute to the analysis of the illicit, offering manifold perspectives to investigate how politics and power play out in space and time (MacKinnon et al., 2009), a contribution that would unlikely be associated with a monolithic endeavour (Sheppard, 2011). Although earlier publications within this tradition were characterized by structural frameworks, since the 90s, growing numbers of interventions have significantly diversified their theoretical apertures (Sheppard, 2011). A mounting appreciation for different epistemologies has been combined with a growing sensibility for grounded research and interdisciplinary influences (Peck, 2016).

Within this context, feminist scholarship has offered one of the most straightforward critiques of geographical political economy, rethinking the role of diverse practices, identities and subjectivities in constructing the economic (Gibson-Graham, 2006). This scholarship has called into question capitalocentric theories of economic change, moving away from grand narratives towards a performative rethinking of the economy to reveal the diverse landscapes of human practices (Gibson-Graham, 2014). Alongside this emergent post-Marxian experience, a materialist perspective considering economic processes as co-constituted of both cultural and political

economic dimensions has thrived and expanded (Werner et al., 2017). This research did not reduce its analysis to structural processes and contributed to conceptualizations of capitalism as a culturally embedded system (Hart, 2002). This perspective is pivotal in rethinking the illicit as a phenomenon operating through practices and in relation to structural dynamics. For instance, this appears in geographical scholarship on critical race theory. Building on the seminal work of Cedric Robinson (1983) on racialized capitalism, this literature has originally combined elements of black geographies, feminist thinking and political economy (Strauss, 2020). The pioneering work of Ruth Gilmore (1999) has shown how racial, economic and cultural elements forge composite political economies of carceration that have significant implications for conceptualizations of the illicit. Interestingly, Gilmore (1999) describes a politics of criminality haunted by moral panic over deviant behaviours rather than legal concerns. Denouncing and contesting the uneven relations and material circumstances that shape these political economic processes, critical race theory has, therefore, explored how difference is integral to the functioning of capitalism and the multiple dimensions of knowledge production that relate to it (Werner et al., 2017).

The politics of everyday practices, the role of cultural ideologies and the reproduction of discursive dimensions have long been understood as the underpinning factors of economic formations (Nagar et al., 2002; Wright, 2006), posing the terms of how capitalism is ‘reproduced and differentiated over time and space’ (Werner et al., 2017: 4). Many cultural elements are, therefore, sedimented in political economy, which has always been cultural (Sayer, 2001) and the geographical scholarship on the illicit has often intrinsically mobilized concepts of Gregson and Crang’s (2016) cultural economy. What follows are some of the older and more

recent voices in this literature, acknowledging this pluralist dimension and making it visible.

## **Economic Geographies of the Illicit**

In their intervention, Gregson and Crang (2016) point out that existing geographical scholarship has examined the illicit only in limited ways, reinforcing binaries relating to illegality and the mainstream economy. According to the authors, geographical works on the illicit have mainly produced studies of illegal activities as defined in the global north but carried out in the marginal spaces of the global south. Furthermore, they suggest that economic geographers have neglected those behaviours that are illegal, but socially accepted, and have ignored the role that circulation plays in opening up opportunities for illicitness (Gregson and Crang, 2016). In sum, they hint that economic geographers have mainly focused on the ‘familiar list’ of illegal activities, pushing the field into a theoretical and empirical impasse (Gregson and Crang, 2016: 3). However, when looking at the studies that have been produced in recent years, there is a variegated scholarship that seems to emerge. The following pages review this geographical research on the illicit to evaluate Gregson and Crang’s (2016) criticism vis-à-vis this evolving field. The publications reviewed retrace how different ideas of the illicit in geography have been mobilized to think about particular activities, people and places.

An important group of publications that discuss ideas on the illicit is research on criminal organizations. A prominent voice in this literature is one of Tim Hall, who has articulated the interdisciplinary scholarship on the subject through a political economy perspective (Hall, 2010, 2012, 2013, 2018). While criminal and illicit economies are not always the same, many overlaps exist between the two (Pinheiro-Machado, 2018). In this regard, Hall (2010) argues that the illicit represents a valuable category to make sense of the interdependence of

formal economies and criminal activities, and the many practices that destabilize clear-cut divisions between the two. For example, he notes that in some countries criminal organizations are de facto licit actors and ‘have recognized or accepted roles in the mediation of business and civil disputes or in the provision of goods and services’ (2010: 843), making it difficult to study these economic actors through the legal/illegal binary. According to Hall (2012), while a vast multidisciplinary scholarship beyond our discipline has produced valuable ethnographic accounts of criminal activities in particular regions, geographers are better positioned to examine their multiscale dimensions. He has thus advocated for research that brings together the elements of different organizations, regulations and flows as a way to capture the complex spatial and organizational dynamics of criminality across scales; and for a rethink of conventional accounts of the global economy and its actors (Hall, 2012).

Several monographs, edited books and journal articles have recently appeared in the literature following this line of thinking. Scholars have suggested that while depressed economic localities often generate the terrain for criminality to thrive, a global map of the illicit needs to take into account the multiscale interconnections that these liminal spaces retain within the formal global economy (Hudson, 2014). Consequently, while critical criminologists have long examined processes of marginalization and criminalization in specific sites (Chadwick and Scraton, 2001), geographers have started to investigate the relationship between endogenous and exogenous factors that create fertile ground for fraudulent behaviours across scales (Chiodeli, 2018; Doshi and Ranganathan, 2018; Penna and O’Brien, 2018). Broader questions thereby arise regarding the illicit and the multiscale dynamics of the economy. This research does not confine criminality to a separate realm (e.g. the illegal) or space (e.g. the global south) but conceives it as strictly

interconnected with broader societal processes (Hall, 2010).

For instance, contributors to the volume *The illicit and illegal in regional and urban governance and development* (Chiodelli et al., 2018) have provided examples of spatial understandings of illicitness that open up theoretical and empirical questions related to the governance of cities and regions, calling into question conventional legal/illegal binaries. These include a broad spectrum of processes and practices, such as the rise and fall of marijuana regulations in the US, the separation between illegal/illicit/informal housing in Italy and the illicitness of non-state groups in the 2011 post-earthquake and tsunami reconstruction in Japan (Chiodelli et al., 2018). Similarly, Hall and Scalia's edited book *A Research Agenda for Global Crime* (2019) brings together controversies on crime that destabilize traditional narratives on globalization. A transnational perspective enables the authors to examine illegality and corruption comparatively and deploy a critical revaluation of unlawful practices in a global age. At a broader level, these works suggest that the liberalization of exchanges, the deregulation of finance and the advancement of technology have brought about the conditions for new illicit networks to emerge (Hall and Scalia, 2019). While most of these studies focus on 'criminality' and are informed by political economy and its vocabulary, this phenomenon is not hermetically sealed instead, these works understand criminal activities as inherently linked to the formal economy. Therefore, they engage ideas on the illicit that relate to the cultural un/acceptability of particular economic practices, and their opposites (Hudson, 2019), which are exposed in Gregson and Crang's (2016) critique.

Within urban geography, much of the conversation on criminality has also revolved around themes of policing and surveillance (Mitchell and Heynen, 2009). The geographies of homelessness and survival have described

how changing legal and institutional landscapes, linked to revanchist political economies (Smith, 1996), have profoundly transformed contemporary cities, creating new patterns of criminalization and exclusion (Davis, 2006). Through the analysis of the increasing commodification of the urban space and the creation of punitive landscapes, this literature has brought to light the processes and patterns that deprive vulnerable social groups of the right to the city (DeVerteuil et al., 2009; Mitchell, 2003), annihilating the space they inhabit (Mitchell, 1997), both in the open areas of the city and in the closed places of care (Hennigan and Speer, 2019). Reverberating with this theme, carceral geography has also reflected on the processes and practices that render particular social and racial groups illicit (Shantz, 2017), providing insights into the extension of neoliberal policies and how this process has brought prison logics into the realm of everyday life (Moran et al., 2018). From gated communities to 'no go' zones, the carceral state has colonized many aspects and scales of the social world (Brown, 2014), defining new frontiers for the geography of the criminal (Jefferson, 2018).

Ideas on the illicit that came under the scrutiny of Gregson and Crang's (2016) intervention are also mobilized in the geography of drugs (Taylor et al., 2013). Some of these studies understand drug trades as co-constituted by local and global dynamics that involve the circulation of people and things, within and without the formal economy. The formal economy is examined as inherently linked to drugs, which has significant effects for the governance of territories (Polson, 2015) and their transformations (Campbell and Heyman, 2015). This literature has analysed the different ways the contraband of narcotic substances is underpinned by capitalist relations of accumulation, production and social reproduction (Agnew, 2015; Banister et al., 2015; Boland et al., 2018; Boyce et al., 2015; Campbell and Heyman, 2015; Massaro, 2015; Slack and Campbell, 2016), highlighting

the impacts that illicit trades have in urban governance (Boland et al., 2018) and the reframing of social policies (Proudfoot, 2017).

At the same time these works have also shown how the legal/illegal boundary is fictitious. For instance, Taylor (2015) anticipates key elements of Gregson and Crang's (2016) critique, showing that the illicit is not a characteristic of particular goods or places. Discussing the synthetic drug known as butylone (bk-MBDB), Taylor (2015) shows that this substance is legal in some countries (e.g. Denmark, Poland and India), but illegal in others (e.g. UK, Sweden and Israel). While regulatory differences go beyond the north/south divide, they may equally include moments of production, circulation and consumption. The materiality of illicitness is also peculiar in Taylor's (2015) account, since 'one tiny tweak, or the addition of an extra atom to a banned drug's molecular structure, creates an entirely new, putatively legal drug' (Taylor, 2015: 7) and therefore renders an illegal object, legal. As such, drugs may easily move in and out of the illegal category, showing that illicitness is not an ontological attribute of particular objects, but rather the curious result of the entanglement of both material practices and semiotic dimensions.

This continuous interaction between the legal and the illegal is also inherent in some of the most intimate aspects of human life. Jeffrey (2020) shows that the human body has become a frontier of the illicit, making life itself a site of speculation, when rights over bodily integrity are subjected to different legal authorities and moral regimes. Legal geographers have investigated how utilitarian biomedical narratives have contributed to the global trade of organs (Parry et al., 2015), which has developed into a complex ecosystem of actors and practices situated at the border of the illicit (Lundin, 2012; Mendoza, 2011), moving the body into the realm of the economic. Questions on the body have also brought scholars to investigate those practices that relate to sex work (Hubbard et al., 2009),

physician-assisted suicide (Shondell Miller and Gonzalez, 2013) and female reproduction (Moore, 2018; Sheldon, 2018). For instance, Calkin (2019) describes a complex political economic geography of abortion in which social control and regulation over female bodies have pushed many women to seek abortion provisions outside of statal legal frameworks, through various illicit practices and mobilities, such as informal online telemedicine, transnational pill trades and abortion travels.

Finally, the subdiscipline of financial geography has also mobilized ideas on the illicit in recent years, unsettling conventional narratives on the spaces and processes of the global economy (Clark, 1997; Haberly and Wójcik, 2015; Hall, 2013; Ledyeva et al., 2015; van Hulst and Webber, 2009; Wójcik and Boote, 2011). While the spatial organization of the world market has considerably changed the structure of financial activities in the last decades, the emergence of global financial networks (GFNs) (Coe et al., 2014) is often seen as intertwined with dynamics of tax evasion, corruption and secrecy (Christensen, 2012). GFNs co-produce spaces characterized by activities that are deemed to blur the boundary of what is licit, providing platforms for transactions that would have otherwise been impossible. Within this context, offshore financial centres (OFCs), namely countries that provide a combination of low tax rates, minimal regulation and secrecy, among other characteristics, are a paradigmatic example of this phenomenon.

OFCs destabilize the association of illicit activities with particular marginal locations or actors. A great number are established in global cities such as Dublin, Zurich or Singapore. Producing an environment that mixes 'fiscal subsidies, tax exemptions, legalized opacity, weak information exchange treaties, and minimal regulation' (Christensen, 2012: 327), OFCs have become centres for financial flows on an enormous scale. While the shared imaginary of tax havens is usually associated with dirty money

laundry and criminal activity, recent studies have pointed out that this is only part of their story. Tax havens attract a variety of actors including major multinational corporations seeking to avoid tax around the world (Barrera and Bustamante, 2018) and parties aiming to hide licit capital from corrupted authorities in home countries (Ledyeva et al., 2015). For instance, Ledyeva et al. (2015) show that the phenomenon of round-trip investment, that is, money sent abroad to be reinvested in the home country, has emerged as a way for firms to bargain better conditions when returning as foreign investors. Here the boundary between legality and illegality becomes particularly blurred. As such, this literature has pointed out how spaces and times of globalization are co-produced by dynamics that pertain to both licit and illicit realms, raising questions on the functioning of the economy, the place of institutions and the role of the state (Smith, 2015; van Hulst, 2012).

It is not the aim of this intervention to provide a systematic review of this evolving field. As such, this article cannot do justice to all the diverse strands of research, variegated issues and empirical cases that have appeared to date. However, this account should be sufficient for the sake of the argument. When looking at how geographical research has articulated ideas on the illicit, this scholarship appears as an heterogeneous field. Therefore, while sympathetic to Gregson and Crang's (2016) intervention for a more serious engagement with cultural economy, this article recognizes the proposed move as complementary rather than antagonistic to other perspectives in the field (Hudson, 2004). In this vein, it advocates for an engaged pluralism (Barnes and Sheppard, 2010) through a cultural political economy approach. Cultural political economy is here mobilized to develop a middle-range research agenda that takes into account multidimensional and multiscale processes in the production of the economic geographies of the illicit and their articulations. To

further highlight this argument, the following section turns to cultural political economy, as this approach integrates elements of political and cultural economy in what Sum and Jessop define as an attempt 'to navigate between a structuralist Scylla and a constructivist Char-ybdis' (Sum and Jessop, 2013: 22).

## **Towards a Cultural Political Economy of the Illicit**

This final section develops a cultural political economy perspective as a potential trading zone of different epistemologies in the subfield of the illicit. To do so, it first situates the call of Gregson and Crang (2016) vis-à-vis the history of the 'cultural turn' in economic geography. Gregson and Crang's (2016) intervention writes into broader critiques of political economy that have grown within the social sciences and the humanities since the 80s. When the cultural turn emerged as a dominant paradigm, scholars progressively abandoned grand interpretations of human history to embrace perspectives that privileged heterogeneity and difference (Harvey, 1989). In economic geography, this shift brought researchers to examine 'what was previously secondary, merely superstructural' (Ray and Sayer, 1999: 1) - cultural meanings and social practices (Lash and Urry, 1994). At first, this change appeared as a reflection of a broader 'culturalization' of economic life (Du Gay and Pryke, 2002). Companies producing cultural artefacts had increased in the post-Fordist era. It was also suggested that meanings, practices and identities played a growing role in the way people think and act at work, contributing to the success and failure of organizations (Du Gay and Pryke, 2002). Culture, broadly conceived, was understood as a way of enhancing performance in an increasingly competitive knowledge-based economy (Du Gay and Pryke, 2002).

This 'cultural turn' not only reoriented empirical agendas in economic geography but

also represented a more profound shift in theoretical perspectives (Castree, 2004). Gone were the days when culture and the economy appeared as separate realms. A novel paradigm, 'cultural economy', bore the promise of providing a new analytical grammar to study the economy as a cultural formation (Amin and Thrift, 2004), saving geography from a 'musty oblivion' (Thrift, 2000: 692). Scholars moved away from structural accounts that rose to prominence in previous decades to embrace fresh theoretical perspectives (Ray and Sayer, 1999). As such, the cultural turn not only appeared as a critique of orthodox, that is, neoclassical economic thinking, but also of political economy, and Marxian scholarship in particular. Inspired by poststructuralist thought, and more broadly by theoretical intakes from cultural studies, cultural economy substantially rethought categories of production, circulation and consumption. Geographers highlighted the way elements such as norms, meanings and values shape the economic and how discourses contribute to constituting the object of economic analysis itself (James, 2006).

This shift did not happen without friction. A cleavage between political economic and cultural economic approaches appeared within the discipline (Yeung, 2001), producing conflicting and almost irreconcilable positions (Amin and Thrift, 2000; Smith, 2005). Yet not all voices emphasized division over unity. Hudson (2004), for instance, recognized considerable merit in cultural economy epistemologies, particularly relating to bottom-up methods of enquiry that he saw as complementary, rather than alternative, to top-down political economic analyses. Similarly, Barnes and Sheppard (2010) advocated for an anti-monist and anti-reductionist economic geography that promotes an engaged pluralism between different epistemologies. It is along these lines that this article suggests a potential synthesis between political economic and cultural economic perspectives on the illicit, rather than a revival of debates about the

merits of competing theoretical approaches. To this end, the following pages develop a cultural political economy of the illicit that aims to combine a rigorous analysis of capitalist relations with an appreciation of semiotic dimensions co-producing economic processes (Sum and Jessop, 2013). As such, cultural political economy (hereafter CPE) is particularly well situated for an analysis of the multiple aspects that the economic geographies of the illicit have so far studied only in dispersed ways, as presented in the previous section of the article.

CPE is an overarching term encompassing several post-disciplinary approaches that first emerged in the 1990s when the cultural turn appeared as a dominant force in the social sciences. Developing as a reaction to the shift of research agendas (Ray and Sayer, 1999), CPE aimed at renewing interest in critical political economy (Jessop, 2010). While there is no consensus on the nature of CPE, several paradigms have appeared under this label. Sum and Jessop (2013) identify five projects and at least eight different research agendas that propose a cultural shift in the study of capitalist processes more generally. Insights from CPE have gained considerable traction in economic geography, where scholars have critically engaged this framework in various ways to think about the underlying mechanisms of globalized systems of production, the state, the urban, natural resources and waste among other themes (Arnold and Hess, 2017; Hudson, 2008; Jones, 2008; Pickren, 2015; Ribera-Fumaz, 2009; Su et al., 2018). The article primarily engages with CPE as articulated by Bob Jessop and Ngai-Ling Sum over a period of two decades (Jessop and Sum, 2006; Sum and Jessop, 2013) integrating criticisms that have been advanced within geography, notably on the missing political (Jones, 2008) and ecological (Hudson, 2008) links.

In a larger context, 'culture' in cultural political economy does not refer to an ontological

category but to the processes through which social agents, individuals or groups, make sense of the world and act in everyday life through systems of meanings (Sum and Jessop, 2013). For decades, geography has been characterized by implicit and explicit assumptions on culture's superorganic nature (Sauer, 1925; Zelinsky, 1973), implying culture to be an entity above human action. Critiques have developed over the years (Duncan, 1980; Mikesell, 1978). However, essentialist perspectives have remained influential until the seminal intervention of Don Mitchell (1995), when the 'idea of culture' and its underpinning historical processes were placed as the primary objects of study. This conception, operationalized in CPE, is a legacy of the Gramscian tradition and is indebted in particular to Williams' cultural Marxism (Williams, 1983) and the influence of spatial linguistics on Gramsci's thought (Ekers and Loftus, 2012). Following this tradition, CPE involves analysing narratives, imaginaries and regulatory technologies that underpin the reproduction of accumulation regimes. Simultaneously, this approach details a vocabulary to analyse capitalist social relationships and their contradictions from a materialist (and ecological) perspective, taking the economy's materiality more seriously. In sum, this opens up possibilities to study who is in the position to define what is socially accepted as licit and what is not in a particular time-space, and what differential economic consequences these processes generate.

CPE integrates material and discursive analysis through two forms of complexity reduction, semiosis and structuration, that are interconnected and co-constitutive of the dynamics of social relations (Jessop, 2010). Semiosis extends beyond linguistic modes of signification and communication and refers to the different processes that enable '*the production of linguistic meaning*' and the '*apprehension of the natural and social world*' (emphasis in original) more generally (Sum and Jessop, 2013: 3).

The social world is conceived as 'always-already meaningful' and 'its analysis must acknowledge the importance of sense- and meaning-making' (Sum and Jessop, 2013: 3). While agents have no direct access to reality, they need to strategically select some aspects of it to describe, interpret and participate in social life (Jessop, 2004). From this perspective, semiosis relates to those practices that define and reproduce shared understandings, behaviours and customs of what the licit/illicit economy is.

Semiosis is related to structuration, namely the emergent patterns of human interactions with the natural world. Structuration represents, therefore, a mode of complexity reduction, which aims to 'transform relatively meaningless and unstructured complexity into relatively meaningful and structured complexity' (Sum and Jessop, 2013: 148). Everyday practices based on shared meanings translate into informal (e.g. habits, routines and customs) and formal (e.g. legal systems and regulatory technologies) institutions that reproduce capitalist social relations in heterogeneous but always structured varieties (Hudson, 2004). Within these emerging social formations, CPE conceives that agents are unevenly empowered and have a differential capacity in their understanding and shaping of the world. They select strategies and tactics according to their knowledge about a given conjuncture and contribute in differential ways to structure building. Therefore, structures are not conceived in a deterministic fashion, nor can they be ascribed to the power of a single agent. Instead, they are the result of asymmetrical interactions and blind co-evolutions (Sum and Jessop, 2013).

Within this context, scholars have provided several productive criticisms to advance a geographical sensibility within a postdisciplinary CPE. In particular, Martin Jones (2008) suggested that earlier versions of CPE have missed a link with geographical understandings of space, failing to promote dialogue between

poststructural and Marxist epistemologies on the matter. At the same time, Jones also underlined several methodological limits of CPE and proposed to move the framework in the direction of a 'practical turn', a process of 'trial-and-error [...] and dialogue with other theoretical currents and emerging empirical research' (Jones, 2008: 395). For him a way to do so is to build upon the work of Dixon and Hapke (2003) on semantic geographies. One tool for this approach is the critical reflection on what the authors call the 'play of binaries' (Dixon and Hapke, 2003: 143), the social construction of semantic artefacts through the use of opposites (e.g. rural/urban, safety/risk, family/corporate). Interestingly, this perspective has important implications for analysing ideas on the illicit in debates over public policies, as exemplified in the empirical example of the following pages.

Related to the methodological link are also broader reflections on the validity of data, risk assessments and ethical issues in conducting research on the illicit (Clark, 1998). There is usually little official and reliable data on this phenomenon. Crime and corruption and a range of other practices at the boundary between formality and informality, and legality and illegality, are constitutive elements that are not impossible but difficult to evaluate from a quantitative perspective. This does not mean that illicit economies are limited to these practices; they are certainly much more than this. However, these elements need to be considered, without exoticizing them, in the analysis of the deep texture of local circumstances that characterize illicit economies. Ignoring their diversity in time and space will fail to provide a decent account. Qualitative and ethnographic research is an appropriate tool to reintroduce this variety of facets (McDowell, 1992), while other methods can always complement these approaches (Yeung, 2003).

Likewise, investigating the illicit sometimes involves working with stigmatized communities, where the design of nonexploitative

research projects and the employment of risk assessments are critical. Scholars are confronted with two sets of issues. The first concerns the confidentiality and privacy of the participants. The second, the safety of the researcher. Particular contexts could involve considerable risks. Together these challenges may dishearten the researcher or lead to situations where traditional fieldwork has little empirical value (Shaver, 2005). This is because informants could deliver untrustworthy accounts when asked or because they may refuse to participate in the study. However, 'it is better to tell the story with admittedly imperfect and incomplete data than to simply throw up one's hands' and not tell it at all (Andreas, 2013: xii). Therefore, investigating the illicit pushes scholars to encounter major barriers and experience a wide array of situations that need to be confronted with flexible and ad hoc approaches beyond disciplinary guidelines and textbook prescriptions. In this regard, CPE offers a particularly flexible framework to integrate different methodologies and confront on-the-ground issues in creative ways.

A second missed link in CPE is the material or ecological one (Hudson, 2008). Hudson noted that CPE has failed to seriously engage with the materiality of the economy 'beyond the recognition that the production of use values necessarily involves people working on and with elements of the natural world' (2008: 422). He suggested that the engagement with the political economic and semiotic registers should be accompanied with considerations for the material one, which is defined here as the 'ecological' register. This is done to distinguish between 'materiality' related to the historical materialist tradition, in this paper referred to as the material register, and materiality related to the ecology. While the former relates to political economy, the latter engages with elements of both Marxian scholarship and new materialisms (Barua, 2019; Castree, 2002). The ecological register refers, therefore, to the production and accumulation of capital (Moore, 2015) in

light of its metabolic relationship with nature (Smith, 2010). On the one hand, this register refers to the Epicurean and Feuerbachian roots of Marxism (Foster, 2000). On the other hand, this move brings into CPE performative elements that enable relational analyses of the economic (Castree, 2002). In so doing, it underlines the ecological transformations (physical, biological and chemical) that underpin the flows of energy and materials in the capitalist economy, adding critical geographical perspectives to CPE.

The ecological register is particularly relevant for an investigation of the illicit. Besides the growing importance in public discourse over the dimensions of the environment for criminal activities, there are implications relating to the governance of the material world more widely. Economic processes in the capitalist economy are reflections of different understandings and materializations of the metabolic relationship between society and nature (Swyngedouw and Heynen, 2003). Whether and how it is considered to be licit for social actors to engage with, this relationship is often a contested process. In other words, the extraction, manipulation and consumption of material resources, may they be raw materials, commodities or waste products, always relate to a 'moral economy of the right, the good, the proper, their opposites and all values in between' (Scanlan, 2005: 22). As the empirical paragraphs will show, ecological narratives are sometimes mobilized to construct oppositional binaries that render particular actors, activities or places illicit; changing, in turn, metabolic processes.

A more nuanced CPE, refined through this geographical sensibility, offers, therefore, a powerful framework to investigate the multidimensional and multiscale processes at play in illicit economies. It provides a tool to examine how and why people engage in different economic activities, what are the underlining material, discursive and ecological dimensions that define these practices as illicit, and how in turn

this process contributes to reproducing capitalist social relationships in variegated ways. As such, CPE offers a flexible framework that is particularly powerful when applied to the study of the illicit through meso-level concepts that would hold together questions relating to its discursive production (e.g. discourses, narratives, imaginaries), material constitution (e.g. accumulation and labour regimes) and ecological composition (e.g. flows of energy and matter) deploying a broader conceptual taxonomy. Contra stigmatizations of epistemological convergences (Barnett, 2005), this article suggests that cross-fertilizations from different theoretical traditions are welcome and useful (Castree, 2002; Ekers and Loftus, 2008).

To show how CPE could be deployed in an empirical analysis, the following paragraphs provide an illustrative example that is drawn from the literature on the geographies of waste (Gregson and Crang, 2015; Hobson, 2015; MacFarlane, 2019; Millington and Lawhon, 2019; Moore, 2012; Oteng-Ababio, 2010). Representing what is abject and rejected, waste is a strange object related to different discursive, material and ecological registers in a spectacular way (Pickren, 2015). Alternative meanings that society attaches to the material world shape contested practices of valuation (Crang et al., 2013; Lepawsky and Mather, 2011) and devaluation (Gidwani and Reddy, 2011; Herod et al., 2014) that in turn define what waste is, how it should be managed and who is entitled to handle it. In recent years, a vast scholarship on this subject, embracing different theoretical perspectives, has grown within geography, generating lively debates (Herod et al., 2013; Lepawsky and Mather, 2013). Within these works, several contributions have focused on the way ecological discourses have been mobilized to promote transitions towards formal waste management systems in developing countries (Demaria and Schindler, 2015; Inverardi-Ferri, 2018a; Lawhon, 2013; Samson, 2015; Schulz and Lora-Wainwright, 2019; Tong

et al., 2015). This process of ‘formalization’ is particularly illustrative of how discursive dimensions are related to political economic outcomes, providing a testing ground for a cultural political economy of the illicit.

Today, the secondary processing of discarded products has developed into an economic sector that generates employment opportunities, produces cheap products for lower classes (Inverardi-Ferri, 2018b) and offers material inputs to other industries on a global scale (Gutberlet, 2012). It is usually estimated that in developing countries, at least between 15% and 20% of waste collection is performed by some form of informal labour (World Bank, 2019). In 2013, more than 20 million people were making a living through the secondary processing of discarded products in China only (Wang et al., 2013). As several reports have shown, waste trading is often accomplished by legal actors that ‘walk on a thin line between legal and illegal activities’ (Geeraerts et al., 2015: 41). In public discourse, these practices are usually portrayed as criminal operations, through a sophisticated linguistic deployment of the formal/informal binary. Networks of actors that include transnational corporations, governmental agencies and international NGOs, such as the United Nations and the World Economic Forum, have recurrently produced reports denouncing informal practices of waste recycling (Baldé et al., 2017), advocated for bans on waste exports (Puckett et al., 2019) and promoted transitions to large-scale formal industrial processing (UNEP et al., 2019).

Particular conceptualizations of the licit economy in conjunction with dominant ecological discourses have informed public policies in many places of the global south (Inverardi-Ferri, 2018a), often resulting in processes of dispossession for poorer classes (Inverardi-Ferri, 2020; Ortega, 2016), through the discursive portrayal of these groups, and their activities, as illicit (Gidwani and Maringanti, 2016). The

particular materiality of discards, as repositories of valuable raw materials, that is, crystallized labour, makes them the site of conflictual political economic interests, engendering value struggles and usually co-determining the emergence of new accumulation regimes, through subsumption of previously accepted activities within new spatio-temporal fixes (Inverardi-Ferri, 2018a). For instance, in China, bans on waste imports, criminalization of traditional modes of recycling and implementation of management schemes for different waste streams have profoundly reshaped the geography of this industrial sector in recent years, sometimes with significant geopolitical consequences (Gregson and Crang, 2019).

Particularly illustrative is the case of e-waste recycling that has been documented in several publications (Inverardi-Ferri, 2017; Lepawsky et al., 2015; Lora-Wainwright, 2017; Schulz, 2015). Today e-waste is one of the fastest growing waste streams and represents a considerable source of wealth. It is estimated that as much as 7% of the total amount of gold worldwide is contained in discarded electronic products (LeBlanc, 2020). Yet the extraction of precious metals from these discards often involves processes with significant social and environmental consequences if not handled in the proper way. While Chinese authorities tolerated, and in some cases even promoted, recycling initiatives that spontaneously developed during the first decades of the marketization transition, in recent years they have severely repressed these activities (Inverardi-Ferri, 2017). Official narratives have increasingly portrayed small-scale modes of recycling, that is, informal recycling, as illicit practices and described them as a source of uncontrolled social and environmental damage (Lepawsky et al., 2015). This semiotic shift reflects a profound cultural rearticulation of China as a modern nation. The redefinition of circuits of waste (and value) represents one of its manifestations. The result has been the implementation of new legislation and the

establishment of an ‘extended producer responsibility’ scheme that demands complex certification procedures (Tong et al., 2015). This fact has penalized traditional recyclers that did not have the resources to meet the new requirements, rendering their operations illegal overnight, forcing them to close down or displace their activities to areas where these practices were still considered licit (Schulz and Lora-Wainwright, 2019). Concurrently, it has resulted in the development of large-scale recycling groups, the benefit of global capital and the reshaping of regional development trajectories in astonishing ways (Goldstein, 2017).

The point of this very brief digression in the geographies of waste has been to show that the analysis of social processes cannot make abstraction of the curious mix of semiotic and material dimensions that co-produces them. As such, combining elements of both cultural economic and political economic perspectives, rather than posing them as alternative paradigms, CPE offers a powerful device to generate theoretical and empirical research on the illicit. At the same time, integrating an ecological perspective within a cultural political economy framework traces new avenues of research for the illicit.

## Conclusions

The illicit raises theoretical, empirical and methodological questions that strongly resonate with the broader interests of economic geographers, who are arguably well equipped to contribute to this prominent conversation in the social sciences. Conceiving the economy as institutionally mediated and socially embedded, their multiscalar and relational conceptualizations appear to foreground a fruitful meeting with the illicit, an intriguing vantage point to investigate the material and semiotic constitution of the economic. Recent attempts to engage with this subject have developed original geographical perspectives. These works have

nourished a nascent body of literature (Chiodeli et al., 2018; Gregson and Crang, 2016; Hall, 2012; Hudson, 2018), creating fertile grounds for intellectual exchange and interdisciplinary dialogue.

While this endeavour is relatively novel, it has already been animated by vivid debates. Two major competing perspectives have here appeared. The first, inspired by political economy, has conceived of the illicit as an element inherently connected to capitalist dynamics and the process of value creation and extraction (Hudson, 2018). The second, rooted in cultural economy, has restated the centrality of semantic dimensions for an understanding of illicit practices and advocated for a shift away from political economy to overcome several theoretical and empirical limits in previous literature (Gregson and Crang, 2016). The article has evaluated this debate vis-à-vis existing studies and, while sympathetic to an investigation of cultural dimensions, has suggested that different paradigms can be conceived as complementary rather than mutually exclusive (Hudson, 2004). Illicit economies, qua economies, are reproduced through varying material and discursive mechanisms that are the result of struggles and different understandings of the world. They provide, therefore, a terrain to ‘capture and hold in suspension the simultaneously ‘economic’ and ‘cultural’ dimensions’ of social life (Bridge and Smith, 2003: 262). As such, oppositions on categories such as culture and the economy are detrimental and should be avoided (Castree, 2004).

Moving beyond antinomies, a CPE perspective on the illicit offers a trading zone for dialogue, developing a more rounded approach and reflecting on some of the limits that scholars are confronted with while conducting research on the illicit. Drawing on work that has tried to integrate a ‘geographical sensibility’ within cultural political economy, the article has therefore engaged different methodologies to challenge the licit/illicit binary. Concurrently, operationalizing a political ecology grammar it has

developed a register to underline the wider material transformations that co-constitute the capitalist economy, opening new areas of interest for the field. In so doing, it has offered a tentative vocabulary to analyse why and how illicit economies emerge, how illicit practices are understood by different actors, what are the governance mechanisms and institutions that underpin them and how these processes contribute to reproducing heterogeneous patterns of uneven development in time and space.

Advocating for an engaged pluralism (Barnes and Sheppard, 2010) that could develop the potential of different perspectives, the article has made connections between different theoretical approaches without subsuming them within a new monism. This fact is particularly significant in light of Gregson and Crang's (2016) intervention. In fact, their considerations seem reminiscent of debates on the cultural turn that animated the discipline almost two decades ago (Amin and Thrift, 2000; Martin and Sunley, 2001) and resonate with concerns on the identity and role of economic geography today (James et al., 2018; Yeung, 2019). Working towards a pluralist economic geography of the illicit contributes to the diversity of our discipline more broadly. This is an effort that entails dialogue (Valentine, 2008) and a profound rethinking of the practices, politics and institutions of our discipline (Rosenman et al., 2020). Whether the conditions for this change will be realized is a matter for future research.

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