

A POLITICAL ECONOMY OF MODERNISM

In *A Political Economy of Modernism*, Ronald Schleifer examines the political economy of what he calls “the culture of modernism” by focusing on literature and the arts; intellectual disciplines of post-classical economics; and institutional structures of corporate capitalism and the lower middle class. In its wide-ranging study focused on modernist writers (Dreiser, Hardy, Joyce, Stevens, Woolf, Wells, Wharton, Yeats), modernist artists (Cézanne, Picasso, Stravinsky, Schoenberg), economists (Jevons, Marshall, Veblen), and philosophers (Benjamin, Jakobson, Russell), this book presents an institutional history of cultural modernism in relation to the intellectual history of Enlightenment ethos and the social history of the Second Industrial Revolution. It articulates a new method of analysis of the early twentieth century – configuration and modeling – that reveals close connections among its arts, understandings, and social organizations.

RONALD SCHLEIFER is George Lynn Cross Research Professor of English and adjunct professor in Medicine at the University of Oklahoma. He has written or edited more than twenty books, including two previous Cambridge University Press books: *Modernism and Time* (2000) and *Modernism and Popular Music* (2011). His most recent books are *Pain and Suffering* (2014; translated into Chinese 2017); *The Chief Concern of Medicine: The Integration of the Medical Humanities and Narrative Knowledge into Medical Practices* (coauthored with Dr. Jerry Vannatta, 2013). He is coeditor of *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (1998) and is a former editor of *Genre*.

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A POLITICAL ECONOMY OF MODERNISM

*Literature, Post-Classical Economics, and
the Lower Middle-Class*

RONALD SCHLEIFER

University of Oklahoma



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For my grandfather, Oscar Schleifer

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Preface

In Chapter 1, the “Methodological Prologue” to this book, I mention that *A Political Economy of Modernism* takes its place in relation to my earlier books. The first book is *Modernism and Time* (2000), which examines cultural modernism in relation to intellectual institutions of the sciences, mathematics, and aesthetics in the early twentieth century. The second book is *Modernism and Popular Music* (2011), which examines cultural modernism in relation to the particular social-aesthetic institutions – the experience – of new popular musical forms conditioned by the remarkable technological innovations related to institutions of experience: recorded music, the radio, widening opportunities for large numbers of people to encounter music of all forms, which arose in the early twentieth century. *A Political Economy of Modernism* similarly focuses on social – rather than intellectual or experiential – institutions by which we can grasp the nature of modernism. In my mind, these three books together attempt to encompass “the culture of modernism” in relation to institutions of forms of knowledge, experience, and social relations. Still, this volume, like the preceding books, does not assume that these books need to be read together. Here, there are a modest number of cross-references, but all three of these books focus independently, from their different vantages, on “modernist” experience, knowledge, and social action.

The independent focus on *A Political Economy of Modernism* is made clear in Chapter 2, which presents the thesis of this book and its purposes and goals. Originally, I had imagined the articulation of the purposes of the book as part of its preface, but I came to see that spelling out the purposes of the book after Chapter 1, Methodological Prologue, would also allow me to constellate them in the manner that the Prologue sets forth; and allow me, I hope, to offer a specific example of the book’s working assumptions and practices. As I note in Chapter 2, the purposes of the book can be understood in relation to its examination of the phenomena of *experience* – and, especially, the aesthetic experience of the

discursive arts – in the context of the new twentieth century; in relation to its description of the *institutional history* it presents, again in that context; and in relation to its examination of new *social organizations* at this time. These purposes, constituting a political economy I note in Chapter 2, correspond to the subtitle of the book: *Literature, Post-Classical Economics, and the Lower Middle-Class*.

I begin and end the Prologue with allusions to Walter Benjamin's famous description of a procedure of exposition that enacts "the art of citing without quotation marks" (1999: 458). I note that I follow such a procedure (with and without quotation marks) throughout this book. Such a procedure aims at grasping a shared culture of knowledge and experience without asserting a subjective or idiosyncratic comprehension of that phenomenon. Rather, such a procedure allows us to appreciate what Thorstein Veblen calls "habits of thought," and what I call throughout this book homological strategies for making sense of – for "constellating" – phenomena that are "cultural" rather than individual. In this book, as in the preceding ones, I understand that such shared strategies, which developed in the long turn of the twentieth century, are constituent elements of the culture of modernism.

I further argue that these strategies are discernible in the nomological (or "law like") sciences, the social sciences, and the human sciences within the cultural of modernism. Thus in the pages that follow I cite Bertrand Russell's contention that in his lifetime – he was writing in 1901 – the nomological science of mathematics has become a science of *arrangement* rather than quantification; I cite Veblen's contention – he was writing in 1899 – that the social science of economics ought to focus on social *institutions* rather than an essentialist conception of human nature; and I cite Roman Jakobson's contention – he was writing in 1929, based on the work of Ferdinand de Saussure in 1905 – that the human science of semiotics presents itself as a science of *functional explanation* rather than a science of "outer stimulus." Scientific understandings in terms of arrangements, institutions, and functional explanations – which is to say new, "modernist" strategies for apprehending knowledge, social organization, and experience – array themselves within the complex unity of the political economy of modernism. Such an array, as I suggest throughout this book, is "performative" in J. L. Austin's sense that it is measured not in terms of constative truth or falsity, but rather in relation to its success or failure of obtaining the "felicity" of a working social bond – of helping to create institutions of habits of thought – which is an important way of understanding "political economy" altogether.

Acknowledgments

This book goes way back on what is now a relatively long career. It begins and ends with readings by Hugh Kenner, who codirected my dissertation, and whose dog, Thomas, jumped up and bit me at a celebratory luncheon at the Kenner household on the day I finished it. Along with warm congratulations, the Kenners kindly offered me a tetanus shot on the completion of my dissertation. It was great good fortune to study with Hugh (and many others, teachers and fellow students, at Johns Hopkins: J. Hillis Miller, Avrom Fleishman, Larry Holland, Mary Kinzie, Kenny Marotta, Eric Birdsall); and it seems to me that all of us in literary studies have rarely encountered someone who reads literary text with as much insight and energy as Hugh Kenner. Like many others, I return to his studies of modern literature for the sheer joy of reading his work.

The book also goes back in my own publishing. A few pages from Chapter 3 appeared in my early, 1979 essay, “George Moore’s Turning Mind: Digression and Autobiographical Art in *Hail and Farewell*,” in *The Genres of the Irish Literary Revival*, ed. Ronald Schleifer, a special issue of *Genre*, 12, 473–503. Some paragraphs in the Conclusion appeared in “Principles, Proper Names, and the Personae of Yeats’s *The Wind Among the Reeds*,” *Eire-Ireland*, 16 (1981), 71–89. Sections of Chapter 5 are based on material from an essay I coauthored with Nancy West in 1999, “The Poetry of What Lies Close at Hand: Photography, Commodities, and Post-Romantic Discourses in Hardy and Stevens,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 60 (1999), 33–57. Also, a few passages from Chapter 3 appeared in an essay I contributed in honor of another of my important teachers and mentors in my professional career, Hillis Miller: “Narrative Discourse and a New Sense of Value: Meaning and Purpose in the Neoclassical Economics of Alfred Marshall,” in *Rereading Narrative*, ed. Carol Jacobs and Henry Sussman (2003), 157–73 and 257–9. The book also benefits from more recent work. Chapter 6 includes material contained in an article I coauthored with George Cusack, “The

Easter Rising and the Lower Middle Class” in *Moving Worlds* 16 (2016), 101–18, which is a Special Issue devoted to *The Easter Rising: Centenary Essays 1916–2016*, ed. Neil Murphy. And part of Chapter 4 also picks up some material from an article I coauthored with Benjamin Levy, “‘The Condition of Music’: Modernism and Music in the New Twentieth Century,” in *The Cambridge History of Modernism*, ed. Vincent Sherry (Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 388–412. As readers will see, the whole of the *Cambridge History* helps me “constellate” modernism in Chapter 1, and all of us who contributed to it owe significant thanks to the insight and care of its editor, Vincent Sherry.

Vince wasn’t the only person who contributed to this work. My wife, Nancy Mergler, who has been the longest listener and reader of these things, has endured my mutterings about political economy for many years. Even the book we wrote together many years ago (with our friend, R. C. Davis), *Culture and Cognition: The Boundaries of Literary and Scientific Inquiry* (1991), touches on the *institutions* of cognition, knowledge, and understanding, the analysis of which, in my thinking, is one of the touchstones of this book and those other studies of modernism that preceded it. Regina Martin read through most of the earliest versions of these chapters with sympathetic critical attention that helped sharpen the argument throughout; and Nancy West read through all of the chapters’ late versions with fine attention to language, argument, and nuance. The careful suggestions of Regina and Nancy have made the writing – and I hope the reading – better in all kinds of ways. In the late composition of this book Rebecah Pulsifer offered careful and useful responses to Chapter 1; Russ Reising offered careful and useful responses to Chapters 4 and 7; Neil Murphy offered careful and useful responses to Chapter 6; and Boris Vejdovsky offered careful and useful responses to Chapter 3. Other long-term friends – Dan Cottom, Jen Crawford, Jeanette Davidson, Tim Davidson, Rita Felski, Laurie Finke, Daniela Garofalo, Ellen Greene, David Gross, Kyle Harper, Jim Hawthorne, Susan Kates, Vince Leitch, David Levy, Kedong Liu, Robert Markley, Ulrika Maude, Neil Murphy, Tim Murphy, Stephen Regan, Benjamin Schleifer, Cyrus Schleifer, Robert Schleifer, Eleanor Spencer, Alan Velie, Tania Venediktova, Tiao Wang, Jen Webb, Sara Wilson, Jim Zeigler, Bennett Zon, and many others over the years – have read, listened to, and often invited talks about what became versions of these chapters.

In addition, I want to express my long-term gratitude to Ray Ryan, Senior Commissioning Editor at Cambridge University Press. When I first contacted him about *Modernism and Time*, probably in 1997,

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I couldn't imagine that in 2017 I would be working together with him on a third book focused on modernism for Cambridge University Press, yet in many ways these projects – *Modernism and Time* in 2000, *Modernism and Popular Music* in 2011, and now *A Political Economy of Modernism* in 2018 – have helped shape my career. His advice, that of his readers, copyeditors, and others have helped me see things more clearly. In this, like many others in the profession, I am deeply grateful for his encouragement and help, and for the help of others at Cambridge University Press as well, in this instance the anonymous readers for this book, who fully entered into its spirit while offering important insights and suggestions for its improvement. But Ray's unerring ability to find the right people to work with his authors is probably best represented by the way in which he found a copyeditor for *Modernism and Popular Music*, who had been a singer who had performed many of the songs the book examines. Finally, I want to thank Sara Wilson for compiling, under a tight deadline, the Index to this volume with intelligence, care, and imagination. I find in the Index connections of ideas – constellations of thought – that enlarge the import of this book.

I dedicate this book to my grandfather, Oscar Schleifer, who immigrated to the United States from what was then Imperial Russia in 1911 (a year after a notable date, 1910, that appears in this study). When I was in graduate school he told me, "beautiful language is well and good, but you should study political economy. Not economics!", he added emphatically; "political economy!" It's been my sense over the years that much work in cultural studies in the humanities and social sciences has been a new version of political economy. I hope and trust my grandfather would have been pleased with my effort in this study to articulate a political economy of modernism. I know he would have been pleased with the concern and efforts of many others – the friends and colleagues mentioned here and the many scholars, cited throughout this book – whom I join in this endeavor.

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