

Culture + Labour = Precariat

Toby Miller

When I returned to graduate school after some years working for the media, business, and the state, I was surprised and delighted to encounter cultural, communication, and media studies—developments I had missed out on the first time round. They helped me to understand that my enjoyment of popular culture could be in a creative and illuminating tension with my epistemological and political beliefs, rather than just contradicting them.

The one thing I found odd was that whilst the labor of cultural interpretation was the focus of much attention within the new field, this was less true of the labor of cultural production. Because I was equally concerned with both sides of this relationship, and how it might be affected by globalization, I applied ideas I had learnt from studying the 1960s and 1970s migration of manufacturing from western Europe to Asia to suggest that we were entering a New International Division of Cultural Labor. I first published on this topic two decades ago.¹ A dozen or so years later, lengthy collaborative projects generated three books and two special issues of journals on the subject.² All well and good. But such questions remain of fringe interest and concern to the field more generally.³ Leaving aside egotistical reasons for wishing that my efforts to place work on our theoretical and empirical agenda had been more successful, I would like to take this opportunity to question cultural, communication, and media studies' relative neglect of labor, especially in the United States. Why don't you teach this subject to your students? Why don't you research it? I think the reason is deeply embedded in a fetish.

Prior to the emergence of capitalism, "culture" referred to tending land. But with the coming of *bourgeois* society, culture came to exemplify instrumentalism at the same time as negating it; on the one hand, there was the industrialization of agriculture; on the other, the tutoring of individual taste. German, French, and Spanish dictionaries of the eighteenth century testify to culture's movement in the direction of spiritual cultivation as well as animal husbandry. And with the spread of literacy, publishing, and education; the advent of customs and laws that were shared, administered, and understood through the printed word; and the peripatetic demography occasioned by capital's urbanization, cultural texts supplemented and supplanted force as sources of authority. As the Industrial Revolution moved

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populations to cities, food came to be imported, and new textual forms were exchanged for both practical and entertainment purposes. Along came a society of consumers, and an art world. There was a corollary in labor terms: the emergence of *poligrafi* in fifteenth-century Venice, and hacks in eighteenth-century London, who wrote popular books about the conduct of daily life. Thus began a division of cultural labor in the modern sense, organized to police and aestheticize the quotidian.

Since the nineteenth century, culture has usually been studied in two registers, via the social sciences and the humanities—truth versus beauty. It has been a marker of differences and similarities in taste and status. In the humanities, cultural texts have long been judged by criteria of quality, as practiced critically and historically. The social sciences have focused on religions, customs, times, and spaces, as explored ethnographically or statistically. So whereas the humanities articulate differences through *symbolic* norms (for example, which class has the cultural capital to appreciate high culture, and which does not) the social sciences articulate differences through *social* norms (for example, which people cultivate agriculture in keeping with an industrial division of labor, and which do not). This distinction feeds into the Cartesian dualism separating thought from work, which presumes that humans have two distinct natures: the aesthetic and the corporeal. One is focused on reason, the other on action. The distinction has become a fetish.

I suggest that this bifurcation and subsequent silencing of labor and culture, for all its sticky origins in Cartesianism, cannot and should not hold. I don't expect the normal science of Yanqui empiricism to make labor a touchstone. It is too deeply embedded in the welfare and warfare bureaucracies for that to happen. But I do hope for some shift on the left. After all, the best political economy and the best cultural studies have long analyzed the mutual impact of institutional power and textual signification. Blending them can heal the fissure between fact and interpretation, between the social sciences and the humanities, and between truth and beauty, under the sign of a principled approach to cultural democracy. This is an urgent matter because of shifts in the political economy that make cultural labor a model—and a sorry one, at that—for other jobs.

We inhabit a world where flexibility is the mega-sign of affluence, and precariousness its flipside: one person's calculated risk is another's burden of labor, inequality is represented as the outcome of a moral test, and the young are supposed to regard insecurity as an opportunity rather than a constraint. What used to be the fate of artists and musicians—where “making cool stuff” and working with relative autonomy was meant to outweigh ongoing employment—has become a norm across virtually every sector of the economy.

A structural homology disables cultural, communication, and media studies from addressing this: labor is disarticulated from texts in our analyses, just as employees are disempowered through hiring arrangements that are organized on a project-by-project basis. The outcome? Contingent labor becomes a way of life—and it is invisible to those of us who are responsible for both understanding media and cultural texts and training students to make them.

Antonio Negri refers to people mired in contingent cultural work as the cognitariat.⁴ They have high levels of educational attainment, and great facility with cultural technologies and genres. The cognitariat plays key roles in the production and circulation of goods and services, through both creation and coordination. Today's "culturalisation of production" may enable these intellectuals, by placing them at the center of world economies, but it also disables them, because it does so under conditions of flexible production and ideologies of "freedom." This new proletariat is not defined in terms of factories, manufacturing, or opposition to ruling-class power and ideology. Indeed, it is formed from those whose immediate forebears, with similar or less cultural capital, were the salariat, and confident of guaranteed health care and retirement income. It lacks both the organization of the traditional working class and the political *entrée* of the old middle class.⁵

But in Western Europe and Japan, this contingent cultural labor is taking shape as a deconstructive, resistive entity. The precariat/précaires/precari@s/precari go under the sign of "San Precario," who guards the spirit of the "flashing lights of life." Since 2001, the Euromayday Network has organized Precariat parades in twenty European cities, featuring "contortionists of flexibility ... high-wire artists of mobility ... jugglers of credit," along with apparitions by San Precario to protect his children against evil bosses.⁶ In 2005, San Precario appeared in the form of a uniformed worker on his knees, with a neon sign on his head (for later apparitions and additional information, see <youtube.com/watch?v=bFQePx3kZMU> and <sanprecario.info/>). Participants note the instability of working life today, and hail a new class of sex workers, domestic servants, and media creators at <maydaysur.org>.

Their manifesto reads:

Somos precarios y precarias, atípicos, temporales, móviles, flexibles
Somos la gente que está en la cuerda floja, en equilibrio inestable
Somos la gente deslocalizada y reconvertida

[We are the precariat, atypical, temporary, mobile, flexible
We are the people on the high wire, in unstable equilibrium
We are the displaced and made-over people]

The Precariat recognizes the complex connection between "eslóganes de los movimientos sociales, reapropiados por el neoliberalismo" [social-movement slogans reappropriated for neoliberalism], that concepts like diversity, culture, and sustainability create spectacles, manage workers, and enable gentrification. Similarly, Espai en blanc "afirma que vivimos en la sociedad del conocimiento y en cambio no existen ideas" [affirms that we live in a society of knowledge and change where ideas barely exist] <espaienblanc.net>. When the Precariat analyzes globalization and declares a new "phenomenology of labor," a "world horizon of production," it is reoccupying and resignifying the space of corporate-driven divisions of labor in ways that most cultural, communication, and media theory has simply ignored. Pace apologists for the creative industries, who argue that the precariat is a fabrication of nostalgic leftist academics in need of theoretical makeovers,⁷ this is an organic movement of

recognition and resistance.⁸ The movement embodies a new style, a new identity—a struggle for security against neoliberalism by young, female, mobile, international cultural workers.

Progressive scholars and activists need to account for the post-industrial standing of cultural workers, and reject a neoliberal embrace of casualized labor. Such an orientation can return us to the best of social theory: Adam Smith's ethnography of work, John Stuart Mill's account of the liberal individual, Karl Marx's observations on the fetishization of commodities, and WEB duBois, Rabindranath Tagore, and José Martí's encounters with subjectivities split between production, consumption, and citizenship. There would be no culture, no media, without labor. Labor is central to humanity, but largely absent from our field. Let's change that.

Notes

- [1] Toby Miller, "Mission Impossible and the New International Division of Labour," *Metro* 82 (1990): 21–28 and "Mission Impossible: How Do You Turn Indooroopilly into Africa?" *Queensland Images in Film and Television*. Ed. Jonathan Dawson and Bruce Molloy (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1990), pp. 122–31.
- [2] Toby Miller, Geoffrey Lawrence, Jim McKay, and David Rowe, *Globalization and Sport: Playing the World* (London: Sage Publications, 2001); Toby Miller, Nitin Govil, John McMurria, and Richard Maxwell, *Global Hollywood* (London: British Film Institute, 2001); Toby Miller, Nitin Govil, John McMurria, Richard Maxwell, and Ting Wang, *Global Hollywood 2* (London: British Film Institute, 2005); *Social Semiotics*, Special Issue on Cultural Labor 15, no. 3 (2005); and *Social Semiotics*, Special Issue on Cultural Labor 16, no. 1 (2006).
- [3] But see some notable exceptions: Mark Deuze, *Mediawork* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007); Catherine McKercher, *Newsworkers Unite: Labor, Convergence and North American Newspapers* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002); Catherine McKercher and Vincent Mosco, ed. *Knowledge Workers in the Information Society* (Lanham: Lexington, 2007); Richard Maxwell (ed.) *Culture Works: The Political Economy of Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); Vincent Mosco and Catherine McKercher, *The Laboring of Communication: Will Knowledge Workers of the World Unite?* (Lanham: Lexington, 2008); Andrew Ross, *Nice Work if You Can Get It: Life and Labor in Precarious Times* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); Ned Rossiter, *Organized Networks: Media Theory, Creative Labour, New Institutions* (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2006); Dan Schiller, *How to Think About Information* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007); and Mike Wayne, *Marxism and Media Studies: Key Concepts and Contemporary Trends* (London: Pluto Press, 2003).
- [4] Ironically, this term derives from a reactionary: Alvin Toffler, *Previews and Premises* (New York: William Morrow, 1983).
- [5] Antonio Negri, *Goodbye Mister Socialism* (Paris: Seuil, 2007).
- [6] Alex Foti, "MAYDAY MAYDAY: Euro Flex Workers, Time to Get a Move on!" *Republicart.net* (2005): 4.
- [7] Stuart Cunningham, "Creative Industries as a Globally Contestable Policy Field," *Chinese Journal of Communication* 2, no. 1 (2009): 13–24.
- [8] Christopher Bodnar, "Taking it to the Streets: French Cultural Worker Resistance and the Creation of a Precariat Movement," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 31 (2006): 675–94.