

The Cultural Labor Issue

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The division of labor really *is* everywhere, isn't it? For the purposes of this issue of *Social Semiotics*, for example, the editors of the journal delegated authority for generating and reviewing content to guests, who in turn roughly divided the labor between recruiting and communicating with authors (Toby, Los Angeles, USA) versus evaluating their work without knowing their names (Rick, New York, USA) (hence abiding by agreeably anal norms of academic scrutiny and surveillance). The technology used to accomplish this bi-coastal work represents further labor, embodied not just in gadgetry, paper, ink, and networks, but in the human effort that added (and adjusted) to stresses on the environment through the manufacture, waste, and hoped-for recycling of the media we used. The outcome was sent on to the journal editors in Wales, from where a whole other division of labor started, to do with the physical and virtual production and distribution of the actual issue. They decided to bifurcate the essays, so one issue became two—and this editorial covers both of them. How much of this labor is cultural?

The word "culture" derives from the Latin "colare," which implies tending and developing agriculture. With the emergence of capitalism, culture came both to *embody* instrumentalism and to *abjure* it, via the industrialization of farming, on the one hand, and the cultivation of individual taste, on the other. Modern usage of the term was born within a linguistic complex that mixed the words industry, democracy, class, and art with ideology, science, capitalism, masses, socialism, citizenship, proletariat, business, education, reform, revolution, salary, and so on (Williams 1958). Raymond Williams argued that culture revealed the constitutive nature of this linguistic complex. Culture is historical, in that it can describe change and process. It is situated in material conditions, so it can refer to general relations among people and document changes in those relations—which also implies a relationship to industry and democracy. And it refers to thought, emotion, and art. Taken together, the various meanings of the term culture that emerged during and after the Industrial Revolution included a society's habits of mind, general state of intellect, body of artworks, and overall way of life. These notions bifurcated into two ways of making sense of culture, which were often at odds. One argued that culture is absolute: that we can document activities and artifacts in the cultural field, as well as their importance and durability. The other maintained that culture is abstract: that we can

interpret what those activities say about our common experience, and look to them as standards or alternatives in everyday life.

This dual vision of culture rests shakily on eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century reactions to democratization. The mob became the masses, and the masses became the master category for one of the most decisive social forces coming out of democratization: the organized working classes. In opposition to the chaos of mob influence, Edmund Burke longed for “organic society . . . the spirit of the nation” that was defined and shepherded by cultivated individuals (Williams 1958). At the same time, the romantic view of cultural labor emerged. Artistic production was distinguished from manufacturing as a special kind of activity; and with it the individual artist was conceptualized as a special kind of person, beyond the grubbiness of “industry.” The differentiation of types that pitted the cultivated minority against the mob was extended to the artist, who was seen as somehow positioned outside democratization and the socialization of labor.

The old notion of the *bourgeois* individual pitted the market against culture. Culture stood for a “superior reality,” unique and original, that the individual artist made, while manufacture was mere imitation. This tension is clearly associated with the greater divisions of mental and manual labor taking place during and after the Industrial Revolution, which also produced socialism. The socialist position argued that the establishment of the common good would give all individuals the full range of material resources. By analogy, socialized cultural work would generate and distribute cultural resources as needed for this new society. Then, in the Victorian period, elites embraced a reformist idea that absorbed the opposition between these views. It became the dominant, service, mode by the twentieth century (Williams 1958). The period since the late nineteenth century has altered the relationship of the production of culture to its regulation, neither a free market nor a socialized system, but rather an administered service to society. Today, “Whoever speaks of culture speaks of administration as well, whether this is his [*sic*] intention or not” (Adorno 1996, 93).

Culture has usually been understood in two registers, via the social sciences and the humanities—truth (the absoluteness of actuality) versus beauty (the aesthetic, abstract, or utopic). This was a heuristic distinction in the sixteenth century, and it became substantive over time. Eighteenth-century German, French, and Spanish dictionaries bear witness to this metaphorical shift into spiritual cultivation (Williams 1983, 38; Prieto de Pedro 1999, 61–62, 78 n. 1; Benhabib 2002, 2). Culture came to serve as a marker of differences and similarities in taste and status within groups, as explored interpretatively or methodically. In today’s social sciences, the languages, religions, customs, times, and spaces of different groups are explored ethnographically and statistically. For their part, the humanities focus on theater, film, television, radio, art, craft, writing, music, dance, and games, as judged by criteria of quality applied critically and historically. So whereas the social sciences articulate differences *between* populations, through *social* norms (e.g. which

people cultivate agriculture in keeping with spirituality, and which do not), the humanities articulate differences *within* populations, through *symbolic* norms (e.g. which class has the cultural capital to appreciate high culture, and which does not) (Wallerstein 1989). This bifurcation also has a representational impact, whereby the “cultural component of the capitalist economy” is “its socio-psychological *superstructure*” (Schumpeter 1975, 121).

The canons of judgment and analysis that kept aesthetic tropes somewhat distinct from social norms were thus very fragile from the beginning. With the industrialization of culture they collapsed in on each other, but not without repressing the tensions between individualized and socialized views of cultural labor. Art and custom are now resources administered for markets and nations—services attuned to crises of belonging, economic necessity, and the old conflict arising over the problem of democratization; namely, the regulation of populations. As a consequence, culture is more than a repository of textual signs or everyday practices. It provides the legitimizing ground on which particular groups (e.g. African Americans, gays and lesbians, the hearing-impaired, or evangelical Protestants) articulate deficits, claim resources, and seek inclusion in national narratives. It is equally the field in which such aspirants to social inclusion are resisted by settled political constituencies and identities that have commandeered authoritative representations of personhood and citizenship through cultural expression (Yúdice 1990, 2002, 40; Martín-Barbero 2003, 40). In short, culture does work, and work makes it happen. Culture manages to “regulate and structure . . . individual and collective lives” (Parekh 2000, 143) in competitive ways that harness art and collective meaning for social and commercial purposes.

So the Spanish Minister for Culture can address Sao Paolo’s 2004 World Cultural Forum with a message of cultural maintenance that is equally about development, in the economic sense of the term, and the preservation of identity (although which identity is always a matter of political preference and contest). Culture is thereby understood as a means of growth in “cultural citizenship,” via a paradox—that universal (and marketable) value is placed in the specificity of different cultural backgrounds. Similarly, Taiwan’s Premier can broker a governmental reorganization as a mix of economic efficiency and “cultural citizenship” (quoted in *Spanish Newswire Services* 2004; *Taiwan News* 2004). The United States has historically blended preeminence in the two cultural registers, exporting both economic prescriptions for labor (the social-sciences side) and popular prescriptions for entertainment (the humanities side).

For the purposes of our project here, we operated from the assumption that cultures are constitutively blended, as per the original messiness of cultivation, and that reactionary, progressive, and reformist ideas about their essences are flawed, given the multiplicity of other affinities that even those who share a particular culture may have (Benhabib 2002, 4). Rather than assuming culture is superordinate, we see it as subject to the shifts and shocks of material politics that characterize other social norms, and hence understandable through a blend of political economy, textual analysis, and ethnography.

The articles we have assembled represent the variety of contemporary cultural studies, via a politics of writing that aims to heighten critical awareness of the possibilities and limits of cultural labor. Some might find the linkage of labor to cultural studies a little surprising. Virginia Postrel, then editor of the libertarian *Reason* magazine, and later a *New York Times* economics journalist, wrote a 1999 op-ed piece for the *Wall Street Journal* in which she described cultural studies as “deeply threatening to traditional leftist views of commerce,” because its notions of active consumption were so close to the sovereign consumer beloved of the right: “The cultural-studies mavens are betraying the leftist cause, lending support to the corporate enemy and even training graduate students who wind up doing market research,” she wrote. Consumption seemed to be the key to this mantra—with production discounted, labor forgotten, the consumer sovereign, and government there to protect that sovereign. If we follow Postrel (and some textual reductionists), the US cultural studies’ public image was as some ghastly academic mirror of the post-welfare state and cultural reindustrialization. The substructural corollary would be the way in which gentrification completes the gutting of working life for proletarians and minorities, as it creates a space of safety, entitlement, and groove for corporate gays, white liberal feminists, upper-middle-class boys and girls who are keen to wear black clothes and eschew suburbia until the children arrive, and people like us and our friends (to the extent we are not covered by any or all of the aforementioned categories).

So the neologism “*Sandalistas*” simultaneously refers to sandals on sale at Barney’s and to *Condé Nast*’s term for Yanquis buying property in post-revolutionary Nicaragua—a mocking reverse trope of the *Sandinistas* (Babb 2004). Someone in the marketing departments had majored in semiotics. “[C]onsumption is now virtually out of control in the richest countries,” where the wealthiest 20% of the world consume over five times more food, water, fuel, minerals, and transport than their parents did (Beck 1999, 6). In the past two centuries, the global population has increased by a factor of five—and goods and services by a factor of 50 (Sattar 2001). Does this mean cultural studies, at least in the United States, is now the handservant of capital?

No. Many leading US-based practitioners have always blended political economy with cultural studies.¹ And much has changed since the Simple-Simon, academic-reader-as-hegemon narcissism that plagued US cultural studies through much of the 1980s and 1990s, which urged earnest graduate students to spy on young people at the mall, or obsessively stare at them in virtual

1. Apart from writers represented here, we are thinking of such US-based figures as Stanley Aronowitz, Michael Bérubé, Ben Carrington, C.L. Cole, Michael Curtin, Susan G. Davis, Susan Douglas, John Downing, Philomena Essed, Rosa-Linda Fregoso, Faye Ginsburg, David Theo Goldberg, Herman Gray, Larry Gross, Lawrence Grossberg, Michael Hanchard, David Harvey, Chuck Kleinhans, George Lipsitz, Cameron McCarthy, Anne McClintock, Lisa McLaughlin, George Marcus, Jorge Mariscal, Randy Martin, Rob Nixon, Constance Penley, Dana Polan, Andrew Ross, Dan Schiller, Ellen Seiter, Ella Shohat, Neil Smith, Lynn Spigel, Bob Stam, Tom Streeter, and George Yúdice. Despite their prominence, their work is often taken to be apolitical-economic or not to stand for cultural studies in dominant public characterizations. Hmm.

communities. Political economy has reasserted itself as an empirical hammer and theoretical resource. This special issue therefore references cultural politics within the framework of cultural studies, but without neoliberal or reactionary *rapprochements*. Of course we are not arguing for an absolute choice between pleasure and politics, leisure and labor, or consumption and citizenship. It is as absurd to *ignore* markets as it is to reduce society to them (Martín-Barbero 2001, 26). But we reject the model of the consumer, audience member, or artist as the center of politics and theory, in favor of a commitment to difference, understood through disability, religion, class, gender, race, and sexuality.

To return, then, to our original provocation—one that was often turned back on us by our contributors as they tried to work out whether or not their work fitted the theme—there are cultural aspects to all that is labor, and there are labor aspects to all that is culture. Artworks are made through labor, just as they may illustrate it in reflexive ways, or documentary ones, or both. Interpretations are made through labor, too, as readers, audiences, and users impart their own forms of value to the objects that they handle, from paintings to lowriders.

We can see these tensions at productive play in Susan E. Cahan's analysis of Andrea Fraser's work, which has itself fruitfully compromised the distinctions between volunteerism and professionalism, in her site critiques of museums, and here between art and sex work. Svetlana Boym's photogram also queries what is work and what is not, as languor and labor merge in the fantasy that is Califaztlan. David Rowe anchors us in another institutional conjuncture: what happens when university and media work routines intersect to make knowledge. Göran Bolin revisits time-honored debates about the state of cultural labor and meaning within Marxist critiques of the popular. Derek A. Burrill takes us to the ultimate Frankfurter nightmare, the video game, and reintroduces us to it via choreography. Gina Neff, Elizabeth Wissinger, and Sharon Zukin also ensure that theoretical concerns about cultural labor are anchored to place and history, with their investigation of the shifting division of labor in the fashion and new media industries. Edna Bonacich carries on this focus with her critical assessment of strategies embraced by the Writers Guild of America as it adjusts to new ways of fetishizing labor, AKA reality television. Paula Chakravarty investigates the contemporary high-technology international division of cultural labor, specifically struggles over South Asian skills and foreign capital. Kelly Gates examines Hollywood's bizarre, self-seeking copyright moralisms aimed at governing the screen and software. Shawn Shimpach looks at media audiences as workers, noting how they undertake labor to make meaning (and money, for others). Stefano Harney returns us to a primarily theoretical focus with a call to an Autonomist Marxism. Finally, David L Andrews blends the empirical and the conceptual in his address of sporting labor.

One final word remembers our friends whose days and nights writing, programming, or teaching the seeming immaterial results in material stress: carpal-tunnel syndrome and entrapped nerves in hands that register the body's outrage in unbearable pain or a frightening fading of feeling; back injuries from the honest labor of sitting up all night and day trying to meet a deadline;

eyestrain; fractiousness occasioned by the long drive of the freeway professor; and, perhaps above all, the casualized work conditions of the cybertarian in jobs that promise freedom (from neckties and hemlines, but also from health coverage; from hierarchy, but also from overtime pay). That's all cultural labor, baby.

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