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Workers' Expressions:  
Beyond Accommodation and  
Resistance on the Margins of Capitalism

The studies in this volume analyze the cultural, political, social, and day-to-day expressions of workers throughout the world in a range of contexts not commonly observed in the anthropology of work. The authors examine actions such as ritual, leisure, and popular entertainment, as well as relationships organized by age, ethnic, and gender distinctions which are present in sites of production, but often unrecognized by scholars working with a narrow notion of "economic" activity. Our aim is not to extend a polarity between culturalist and productionist positions, but we do wish to deepen appreciation for the range of cultural discourses that are engaged in working, to show that the labor process is itself a cultural process.<sup>1</sup>

One of our central concerns *is* to analyze and understand the organization and outcomes of the labor process and how they effect the way people are or are not mobilized to work. "The labor process" constitutes a social fact—frequently overlooked by many

social scientists—of major importance in every cultural and historical situation. Our position is that this process cannot be understood without paying attention to the aesthetic and narrative forms that are embedded in and shape both quotidian activities and production. These studies open up a new space for an anthropology of work, a space beyond rigid dichotomies such as the contrast between work and leisure or between accommodation and resistance. The latter distinction, in particular, has oriented much recent research in political economic and cultural studies of subaltern groups and classes (see, e.g., Abu-Lughod 1990; Guha 1982a; Scott 1985).

Rather than provide synopses of the chapters which follow, our introduction simply discusses some of the issues that emerge from critically reflecting on what the “anthropology of work” might be expected to accomplish. While other chapters are mentioned in passing where relevant, this chapter is concerned above all with two issues. First, we discuss some of the absences in the literature on the anthropology of work, and new directions for research. Second we suggest a rethinking—not all that radically new—of the way work and labor are conceived by anthropologists that more closely follows the way workers themselves think about it. Throughout, we argue for looking at the rich material on leisure, popular entertainments, and ostensibly nonwork activities—certainly not connected to a restricted notion of “economic” action—to gain insight into the labor process.

## WORK AND SOCIAL THEORY

Volumes edited recently by R. E. Pahl and H. Applebaum, among others, provide excellent introductions to the diversity of approaches to the study of work. We assume that readers of the present volume are familiar with this diversity, and understand how the proposition that “employment is simply one *form* of work” (Pahl 1988:11, emphasis added) allows for an examination of related practices and discourses. Having said that, it is surprising that researchers show remarkably little agreement on what the study of work and workers should involve beyond the study of employment. The routinely invoked but very problematic distinction between “tradition” and “modernity” has figured in much of this literature. The idea that a “coherent set of work values valid for the entire society” is appropriate for “nonmarket” societies (i.e., an holistic

approach is possible) but not tenable in industrializing societies owing to the alleged "complexity" of the latter (Applebaum 1984:1) is the organizing feature of some of this research. "Work literature" thus becomes an analysis of occupational cultures or "work cultures" (see Applebaum 1984) and avoids addressing how the latter are embedded in specific cultural and historical formations. While this approach provides an appreciation of the diversity of working situations, it makes comparison difficult or impossible. We feel that this conundrum diminishes the possibility of providing a critical assessment of historical processes of differentiation between workers throughout the world.

The literature on work and the labor process is voluminous and in many ways co-extensive with modern social inquiry. In the decades immediately after World War II, the massive economic subjugation of what began to be called "the developing world" was realigned by new ideologies of development and change. During that period, a burgeoning literature on "modernization" and "development" shaped research into a grid which analyzed social relations, including those involved in work, in the light of instrumental rationality.<sup>2</sup> From the 1960s onward, a number of critical theories—dependency, underdevelopment, and world-systems—emerged. Among other things, these theories emphasized structural factors and the systemic features linking, integrating, and disintegrating work and labor in the First and Third Worlds, in the (capitalist) core and on its periphery.

The differences between a "development" approach and an "underdevelopment" approach are profound with respect to their theoretical emphases and fundamental with respect to the empirical research oriented by each. Nevertheless, they are not totally devoid of similarities. One characteristic they share is that both, to different degrees, make it difficult to carry out detailed studies of the ways working people labor in connection with everyday routine, public performance, religious representation, and gender and ethnic distinctions. Both the emphasis on instrumental rationality, and the reliance on structural explanations pose certain limitations. The tendency to naturalize the consolidation and extension in time and space either of "modernity" or of "the world capitalist system" devalues the position of cultural practices in the study of working and the labor process. Development theory and underdevelopment theory alike obscure from view the very practices according to which people work through situations and under conditions inimical to their perpetuation both as individuals and

as members of social classes. Furthermore, they cannot provide adequate models for understanding people whose workplace is not entirely subsumed by the metaphor of the shop floor.

Anthropologists and other social scientists long relied upon unexamined and unstated ideas about the meaning of work to anchor their classifications of identity and class. In recent years, some researchers have interrogated these classifications. One collection edited by Sandra Wallman, *The Social Anthropology of Work* (1979), for example was an innovative attempt to map analytic intersections of cultural meanings associated with the category of work. In studies focusing on nonwestern societies, different authors considered the consequences of work in relation to culturally constructed categories of time, value, person, and technology. While the range of the essays was broad, offering different theoretical orientations and examining different cultural contexts, they mostly explored what Wallman identified as "two fundamental human issues":

While preoccupations of work are directly concerned with the work of making a living, they are indirectly but equally concerned with the work of personal and social identity (Wallman 1979:vi).<sup>3</sup>

The present collection extends the explorations of Wallman et al. through the presentation of evidence about how categories of work and identity are reciprocally constituted. In exploring how the apprehension of personal and historical consciousness shapes the contexts of work, and how work itself shapes consciousness, we hope to challenge and transform one of the most tendentious and enduring analytic distinctions of modern social inquiry: that between action and knowledge.

Challenging that distinction poses a number of questions: How does one conceive of or separate practical activity and consciousness? More specifically, what are the implications of rethinking that exaggerated distinction for our understanding of how cultural discourses orient terms of domination, and of resistance to domination? Do the accounts of the labor process routinely produced by researchers adequately examine the cultural representation of work for members of particular societies? In short, what are the boundaries of or separations between work and nonwork and how do these distinctions help create historical representations and self-representations of subjects?

## REPRESENTATIONS OF WORK

The papers in this collection address the lacunae in the textual representation of work by analyzing the interventions of popular culture and performances through which the labor process is redefined. They demonstrate how elements of popular culture enter into the labor process. Representations of working experiences generated by workers themselves may articulate forms of resistance—and sometimes accommodation—to domination and exploitation. The point of reference of those representations is not, however, invariably restricted to the labor process per se; it includes social relations more generally and, of particular importance, performance dimensions of work and of leisure. One proposition orienting all of these studies is that since separations between work and leisure and between instrumental and noninstrumental definitions of time are not coeval with subjectively experienced reality, they should not be maintained in analyses of social life.

The meaning of work has long been regarded as centrally important for the analysis of class formation. Yet providing only histories of inequalities and describing the formation of class ideologies in capitalist development runs the risk of reducing labor to merely an effect of a system of dominant economic forces. Once labor is imagined as thoroughly dominated by economic forces, analysts have trouble connecting it to everyday life. If it is so cut off, we must then ask: How can labor produce everyday life? How are the two related? As Bruce Brown (1972) reminded us, Freud and Marx, the two great theorizers of sublimated and masked determination, were both questioning precisely the connection between productive activity and everyday life.

In our view the domains of work, leisure, and popular culture, of productive activity and everyday life, will always overlap, which is to say that there is no fixity to the character of the relations between them. Senses of self, of performance, and of mastery are not equivalent to the practices explicitly labeled and understood as economic pursuits. The production of historical self-consciousness cannot be reduced to the production of economic value alone because even economic activity itself is continuously redefined, reordered, and rearticulated in cultural and situational terms.<sup>4</sup>

In positivist discourses, on the other hand, labor is singled out as the nexus of economy and class and privileged as the *dominant* representation of human agency; the variety of activities, practices and factors that comprise social (re)production remain unexplored and underexamined (by way of contrast, see Turner 1986). Our

perspective is shaped by the idea, shared with many other critical thinkers, that social representations are not produced as a single signifier-signified relation (see, e.g., Timpanaro 1975:135–219; Palmer 1990 xi–47 for discussions of this issue). Precisely because the labor process signifies a range of meanings and relations between meanings, the examples of social representation and the labor process presented in the present volume are considerably more complex than positivist versions.

A recent discussion of multiple cultural significations of work/labor is found in J. and J. L. Comaroff's study of Tshidi peasant proletarians in South Africa. For the Tshidi "... the making of the social world past and present..." (Comaroff and Comaroff 1987:193) is encoded in their oppositional distinction between their own terms for "work" and Afrikaans' terms for (wage) labor:

... in the Tshidi imagination work contrasts with labor as does self construction with self destruction; as time logged 'out there' with the creative process of production and reproduction 'at home' (*mo gae*); as the enduring value of cattle with the capricious flow of money (Comaroff and Comaroff 1987:192).

A more dated, but equally apposite, example of a popular cultural construction of economic activity and value, which at the same time demonstrates the mutual imbrication of work and construction of self, is found in Placido Chavez's introduction to his account of a peasant revolt in northern Mexico at the end of the nineteenth century:

My father and my uncles were decidedly of the humble class, they never disposed of capital; their only capital, the greatest and most precious, was their work, their self-esteem and their honor, an honor without flaw or stigma, natural faculties which they conserved to the final days of their lives (Chavez 1964:6).<sup>5</sup>

These examples from the Tshidi of Botswana and the peasants of Chihuahua provide arguments for using a noneconomistic understanding of the labor process. Further, they point to a variety of activities that can be classified as socially (re)productive, in light of which both work and labor may have multiple significations. Intersections of work and everyday life are not simply confined to the

rankings of occupations or careers in society. Understanding the meanings of work entails the position that it is at all points creative and—not merely productive—human activity.

Several points emerge from this discussion. Work means something different to those who do it and to those who analyze it. In studying work and workers we sometimes refer now to work, now to “labor,” to signify creative activity on the one hand and economically productive activity on the other. It is convenient, for example, to consider productive activity as laboring, the exercise of labor power. But even when labor power is systematically alienated, productive activity is culturally constituted and not productive *only* of economic value.

The distinction between the terms work and labor is not without problems, but it is useful for organizing a general analysis of the multiple forms of power present both within and outside of the workplace. The distinction marks an arena of contestation. Workers and nonworkers fight over how the production process will be organized. Workers try to turn labor into work, while capitalists struggle to transform work into labor. This arena of contest provides the subject matter for this book.

## THE LABOR PROCESS

The alternation of meaning attached to production as purposive economic activity (labor) and as a kind of social relationship (work) is not an *absolute* separation. Raymond Williams points out that there is an “interesting relation” between the terms:

*Labour and toil* are still harder words than work, but manual workers were generalized as *labourers* from c13, and the supply of such work was generalized as *labour*. Work was then still available for a more general sense of activity (Williams 1983:335).

Analyzing cultural significations of work and labor as continuous with subjectivity and socially constituted identity *embeds* them within modalities of power and social abstraction.

Pursuing a direction of study first elaborated in Marx's *Paris Manuscripts* (1964 [1844]) and the *Grundrisse* (1973 [1857–8]) Arendt (1958), for example, examines the distinction between work and labor, present in all European languages, and how that distinction figures in the Western philosophical tradition. In her view, labor is performed in service to and at the command of others, while

work leaves a product behind which outlasts its own activity and forms a durable addition to the human artifice (Arendt 1958:138). This valuation was at the heart of the emergence of the justifying logic of scientific-technical thought.

According to Arendt, contemporary analytic categories for identifying and understanding the labor process have been shaped by a logic that assumes the automated worlds of production and the freedom from necessity to labor, as a teleology of the good in human life. Arendt notes that such a project depends upon the continuous consumption of products as a substitute for the "artifice" of work. It enjoins the philosophical equation of happiness with "... perfect balance of life process of exhaustion and regeneration ..." (Arendt 1958:134). Her more general epistemological point is that as social theorists, we have devalued our approach to the labor process because we fail to understand life and labor cycles as fundamentally creative and constitutive. We might add that this kind of ideologically motivated longing for "perfect balance," justified by the functionalism of 1960s sociology and continued by "organizational" theory, is precisely what underlies the carving up of consciousness and social reality into realms of "work and leisure." The labor process is about more than just labor, however, and as anthropologists we should try to open a space for problems of value and resistance to the dominant ideologies of capitalism to be reapprehended.<sup>6</sup>

In the field of labor studies, the problem of value and resistance has been most frequently engaged in traditions of Marxist scholarship. Since the publication of Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital* in 1974, an entire school studying the labor process has arisen (e.g., Burawoy 1985; Edwards 1979; Cohen 1987; Sirianni 1981; Zimbalist 1979). Braverman's book was subtitled "The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century" and constituted nothing less than a theory of how managerial ideologies (particularly those of Taylor) fashioned an environment in which craft mastery and skill were systematically devalued. While Braverman's argument involved more than this, its implications and consequences were far reaching. The book spurred discussion of the importance, both locally and globally, of workplace skill and control in the continued expansion of capitalism. It also detailed the rise of managerial ideology and the way managerial domination figured in the formation of resistance to rationalized ideologies of productive and industrial intensification.

Sheila Cohen's critical discussion of the impact of Braverman's work finds that researchers have been seduced by his cri-



tique of deskilling and control of the labor process while ignoring the central point of his argument. She argues that Braverman's analysis really hinges on recovering Marx's "central dynamic of the relations of production, that is, exploitation and the generation of surplus value" (Cohen 1987:39). With such a point in mind, it is easy to see how focusing solely upon "control" diverts analysis from the complex and contradictory conditions of resistance and transformation that surround any working situation.<sup>7</sup>

Much of Braverman's argument was presaged by Gramsci's writing on "Americanism and Fordism" in his prison notebooks (see Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* 1971:279–318). Gramsci was concerned about the implications of rationalized work disciplines for working class ("subaltern") subjects and members of the new classes of the dominant order (Gramsci: *ibid.*). Gramsci's interest was piqued by the convergence of managerial ideologies with the historical sense of purpose and individual human agency which he saw as a necessary component of an emergent hegemonic class. The growth and extension of such ideologies, particularly in the United States, was identified as a new ground for production of unequal social relations, in which even the physical, sexual, and imaginative being of those who worked was continually subject to the ordering of information about production and interwoven with the fabric of social experience (Gramsci 1971:300–305).

Gramsci's expansive notion of discipline, instead of control, provides insights into the ordering of subjectivity not only in connection with the production process but also within everyday life. This requires a recognition of the power dimension involved in just "getting by." As Lila Abu-Lughod writes:

work on resistance influenced by Bourdieu and Gramsci recognizes and theorizes the importance of ideological practice in power and resistance and works to undermine distinctions between symbolic and instrumental, behavioral and ideological, and cultural, social and political processes (Abu-Lughod 1990:41).

A key concern of this volume, in other words, is understanding the establishment of forms of hegemony under capitalism, and analyzing how those forms are challenged and contested (if not always successfully). In engaging the latter set of issues, researchers need to look beyond the shop floor, and beyond the misidentification of the "informal sector" as only a product of, rather than a

response to, the expansion of capitalism. Instead we must reengage the cultural forms through which labor, nonwork (and not just the heroic refusal to work), pleasure, desire, and performance are organized by working people. Much historical and ethnographic research on work has been conducted without these concerns in mind. The result has been the generation of a fundamentally impoverished understanding of the labor process, of work and nonwork, of subjects' apprehension of social possibilities, of resistance to domination, and of when and why resistance does or does not occur.

A focus upon cultural meanings of work, pleasure, gender, and representation can enrich the Marxist debate about what constitutes ("objective") material conditions. In such a light the analysis of modes of production and the labor process assumes a radically different character. Eric Wolf made an important intervention in this debate in his study of the self-reproduction of societies in non-western regional and historical perspectives (*Europe and the People Without History* 1982). That book succeeds at presenting culturally framed analyses of the labor process while providing an account of the importance of noncapitalist modes of production in the ongoing formation of capitalism on a world scale. Yet as Asad has noted, the global perspective entailed in Wolf's project necessarily calls for more studies attuned to modalities of inequality and power (Asad 1987:606).

The papers included in this volume analyze some manifestations of the social relations of power and work, of production and reproduction, of action and meaning. We think that they fall under the purview of "... the story of transformations that have reshaped those conditions which are not of people's choosing but within which they must make their history" (Asad 1987:607; cf. Marx 1963 [1852]:15). For some time research carried out in the anthropology of work has provided rich material for studying precisely the modalities of inequality and power which are manifest equally at the center and on the margins of capitalism (see Nash and Fernandez-Kelley 1983). But this positive outcome of the research has been neglected or overlooked since much of the "anthropology of work" has uncritically constructed workers as "objects" for study akin to what an earlier anthropology did to "primitives." As what should be now familiar modalities of exploitation and development penetrate into more societies, a critical anthropology of work needs to be sensitive to ideological mystifications of the meanings of work and productivity (see Ong 1987).

In another context, commenting on the valorization of heterogeneity in our increasingly routinized metropolis, Jean Franco described how:

The Third World becomes the place of the unconscious, the rich source of fantasy and legend recycled by the intelligentsia, for which heterogeneity is no longer a ghostly, dragging chain but material that can be loosened from any territorial context and juxtaposed in ways that provide a constant frisson of pleasure. The intelligentsia no longer speaks for the masses but productively transposes mythic material (Franco 1988:505).

Rather than transpose mythic (or mundane) material, the thrust of these essays is simply to look around the corner, to the margins of capitalism, where millions labor, and some still manage to work. By examining the creative determination and social complexity of work and labor, we achieve an understanding of the reciprocal narrative constitution of work and identity, and the way performances and audiences contribute to that process.