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# Normativity and Social Justice in the Analysis of Creative Labour

## David Hesmondhalgh

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### Abstract

There has been a remarkable rise in studies of creative or cultural labour in recent years. Much of this research has emerged from cultural studies. Cultural studies writers have drawn attention to political questions of subjectivity that tend to be neglected in Marxian and other approaches to labour. In doing so, they have drawn, directly and indirectly, on post-structuralist concepts and assumptions. I discuss these critical cultural studies approaches briefly in the first section of this article. My claim is that, in spite of their important contributions, such studies lack clear conceptions of what might constitute good work, including good work in the cultural industries (which is how ‘creative labour’ is defined here). This failure to offer an adequate normative grounding limits critique. To help fill this lacuna, I then outline research that emphasises concepts of *autonomy* and *self-realisation* as components of good work (sections 2 and 3), followed by a post-structuralist critique of this research. I question this critique, in order to suggest some of the limits of post-structuralist perspectives on work more generally (section 4). These debates in the sociology of work and organisations do not directly concern creative or cultural work, but they throw important light on it. In particular, as I explain in section 5, they illustrate some of the problems of rejecting normativity in relation to labour. I begin the final part of the article (section 6) by claiming that debates about creative labour need to be considered as part of broader debates about the distribution of good or meaningful work across modern societies. Briefly referring to political philosophy’s treatment of work, I suggest some ways in which attention to such issues might advance studies of creative labour.

### Introduction

As this special issue attests, there has been a remarkable rise in studies of creative or cultural labour in recent years. It is now more than reasonable to speak of a ‘turn to cultural work’ in the social sciences and humanities. Much of this research has emerged from cultural studies. This has helped make up for the strange neglect of labour in the political economy of culture and in other areas of cultural analysis (see Hesmondhalgh 2010 for discussion). Cultural studies writers have drawn attention to political questions of subjectivity that tend to be neglected in Marxian and other approaches to labour. In doing so, they have drawn, directly and indirectly, on post-structuralist concepts and assumptions. I discuss these critical cultural studies approaches briefly in the first section of this paper. My claim is that, in spite of their important contributions, such studies lack clear conceptions of what might constitute good work, including good work in the cultural industries (which is how I am defining ‘creative labour’ here – see Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2010). This failure to offer an adequate normative grounding limits critique.

To help fill this lacuna, I then outline research that emphasises concepts of *autonomy* and *self-realisation* as components of good work (sections 2 and 3), followed by a post-structuralist critique of this research. I question this critique, in order to suggest some of

the limits of post-structuralist perspectives on work more generally (section 4). These debates in the sociology of work and organisations do not directly concern creative or cultural work, but they throw important light on it. In particular, as I explain in section 5, they illustrate some of the problems of rejecting normativity in relation to labour. I begin the final part of the article (section 6) by claiming that debates about creative labour need to be considered as part of broader debates about the distribution of good or meaningful work across modern societies. Briefly referring to political philosophy's treatment of work, I suggest some ways in which attention to such issues might advance studies of creative labour.

## **1. Cultural studies approaches to creative labour**

One of the most valuable contributions of cultural studies is the attention it has paid in recent years to the particularly high levels of emotional investment in creative labour on the part of workers in the cultural industries and other related industries. In an early contribution, building on groundbreaking studies of the formation of 'consent' in workplaces by Marxian sociologists such as Michael Burawoy (1979), Gillian Ursell (2000) acknowledged that processes such as union de-recognition and considerable reductions in labour costs and earnings provided plenty of evidence to support a Marxist reading of television labour, focused on exploitation and property. But she also noted 'an intensification of the self-commodification processes by which each individual seeks to improve his/her chances of attracting gainful employment' (Ursell 2000: 807) and analysed how television workers had, in the era of casualisation and increasing freelance work, come to take on the work of organising their own labour markets. This element of 'apparent voluntarism' needed to be forefronted, claimed Ursell, and she turned to Foucauldian theory not to dispense with labour process theory concerns but 'to approach them more substantially' (Ursell 2000: 809). In particular, she drew on Foucauldian governmentality theorist Nikolas Rose's (1999: 145) idea that, in conditions of 'advanced liberalism', freedom is redefined as 'a capacity for self-realisation which can be obtained only through individual activity'. Rose (1999: 244) believed that work played an increasingly key role in modern identity formation, and that 'subjective desires for self-actualisation are to be harnessed to the firm's aspirations for productivity, efficiency and the like'. The reference to individual as opposed to collective activity is significant; here Rose's Foucauldian approach shows some similarities with parallel developments in other branches of sociology that were also emphasising individualisation. But whereas writers such as Ulrich Beck (2000) emphasised the ambivalent results of such individualisation, in that it potentially frees subjects from the bonds and demands of tradition, Rose and Ursell stressed negative dimensions, such as individuals having to fend for themselves.

Angela McRobbie (2002a: 523) echoed Ursell in pointing to the 'utopian thread' involved in the 'attempt to make-over the world of work into something closer to a life of enthusiasm and enjoyment', and in focusing on how this leads to a situation where, when things go wrong, young people entering these creative worlds of work can feel they only have themselves to blame. McRobbie's focus was on how notions of creativity, talent and work are being redefined in those burgeoning micro-businesses of the cultural sector associated with young people, including fashion and design, but also entertainment industries such as clubbing, recording and magazine journalism. In this respect, McRobbie usefully broadened the study of creative work to include a wider set of conditions and experiences, including the way in which aspirations to and expectations of autonomy could lead to disappointment, disillusion and 'self-blaming'. She also pointed

to the gendered aspects of these conditions, with women now expected to find full-time work, uninterrupted by family commitments, satisfying and enriching (McRobbie 2002a: 521). The context for McRobbie's critique (see also McRobbie 2002b) was the then UK Labour government's creative industries policy, and their general valorisation of labour, where 'work comes to mean much more than just earning a living; it incorporates and takes over everyday life' (McRobbie 2002b: 99). McRobbie was usefully questioning the 'ideal of self-expressive work' and its place in the Labour government's advocacy of 'a new youth-driven meritocracy', involving a labour of love and self-exploitation.

Similar issues have also been explored by other researchers in relation to work in the IT sector, forms of work sometimes unhelpfully blurred with creative labour in governments' conceptions of creative industries. Andrew Ross (2003: 9) observed how, in the eyes of a new generation of business analysts in the 1980s, Silicon Valley 'appeared to promote a humane workplace not as a grudging concession to demoralized employees but as a valued asset to production'. 'New economy' firms, he argued, aimed to provide work cultures that 'embraced openness, cooperation and self-management' (ibid). But this, showed Ross, was closely linked to long working hours and a serious blurring of the line between work and leisure. Whilst the dot.com working environments of the 1990s offered 'oodles of autonomy along with warm collegiality' they also enlisted 'employees' freest thoughts and impulses in the service of salaried time' (Ross 2003: 17, 19).

Also writing about new media work, Andreas Wittel (2001) saw there a paradigmatic case of an emergent form of community that he calls 'network sociality', one which appears to be individualistic and instrumental, involving an assimilation of work and play, while Tiziana Terranova (2000), from an autonomist Marxist perspective, provided an early analysis of the 'free labour'<sup>i</sup> underlying the emergent digital economy, countering the optimistic visions of Marxian utopians who hoped that gift economies might undermine capitalism from within. Ros Gill (2002), in a study of European freelance new media workers, found evidence that features of the work that seemed superficially attractive, such as its informality and high levels of autonomy, were in fact particularly problematic for women because of the lack of clear criteria for evaluating work and especially because of the difficulties such informality caused when seeking new contracts.

These cultural studies researchers raise an issue of great significance for understandings of creative labour: if positive features of creative and cultural work, such as autonomy, sociality, and enhanced possibilities for self-realisation, in the end lead only to self-exploitation, then these supposedly desirable forms of labour look far less attractive. Is creative labour, then, really barely-disguised 'bad work'? An overall assessment of creative work is never really provided in analyses of cultural work, and this is understandable in many ways given that the researchers concerned were responding to immediate political concerns. But such an assessment is important, not least because it raises further issues regarding what kinds of transformations might be advocated for creative labour.<sup>ii</sup> I want to address these issues by considering two potentially positive features of good work discussed by cultural studies theorists: autonomy and self-realisation. The concepts of autonomy and self-realisation have been invoked as features of 'good work' in a wide range of perspectives, including sociology, psychology, philosophy, history and social theory.

## **2. Autonomy as a Feature of Good Work?**

The terms autonomy has a huge and tangled legacy. In its most basic philosophical form, to be autonomous means 'to be one's own person, to be directed by considerations,

desires, conditions, and characteristics that are not simply imposed externally upon one, but are part of what can somehow be considered one's authentic self (Chrisman 2009: no page). This idea of a reliance on an authentic self – an idea linked by some to the dubious universalism of much modern thought—has meant that some feel that the concept no longer has any political value, and should be deconstructed. Yet to dispense with the concept altogether takes away a potentially valuable tool for probing freedom and independence in work, including creative labour. Although the importance of the term was initially based on its centrality in Kantian and utilitarian philosophy's conceptions of the person, and of personal morality, it has long since multiplied in its uses beyond philosophy, and it cannot be dismissed on the grounds of its associations with those traditions. I intend the term in a more sociological sense here. It is often applied to groups, including groups of workers, as much as to individuals. So it is this general sense of 'self-determination' that is relevant here, but autonomy cannot simply be evoked as freedom from others (MacIntyre, 1984: 205, 221).<sup>iii</sup> For a start, all autonomy is limited, in that individuals and groups are, to some extent at least, socially constituted by others beyond themselves. Total autonomy in any sphere of life – whether artistic, scientific or ethical – is an impossible ideal, because there is no life without constraints or determinants. This 'limitation' can be seen as a desirable aspect of human sociality.

In a study of workers in a Canadian nightclub, Mike Sosteric (1996) has addressed the issue of the degree to which relative autonomy in the workplace might be thought of as a feature of good work. He bases his account on a distinction between two strategies of organisational control, made by a Marxian sociologist Andrew Friedman in 1977. Friedman distinguished between two types of strategy that top managers use to exercise authority over labour power – direct control and responsible autonomy. The former tries to limit labour power by coercive threats, close supervision and minimising the responsibility of individual workers. By contrast, the other strategy of responsible autonomy

attempts to harness the adaptability of labour power by giving workers leeway and encouraging them to adapt to changing situations in a manner beneficial to the firm. To do this top managers give workers status, authority and responsibility. Top managers try to win their loyalty, and co-opt their organisations to the firm's ideals ... ideologically (Friedman, 1977: 78).

Both strategies have been present throughout history, says Friedman, but responsible autonomy 'has been applied most consistently to privileged workers and the Direct Control type of strategy to the rest' (1977: 79). With the rise of monopoly capitalism, involving a greater size and complexity of firms, along with increasing resistance by workers during the early twentieth century, management becomes better organised and more conscious, and this for Friedman led to a rise in the relative importance of responsible autonomy. Friedman was highly critical of the notion of responsible autonomy, which he saw in Marxian terms as an ideological trope: responsible autonomy does not remove alienation or exploitation, it 'simply softens their operation or draws workers' attention away from them'. As we shall see, this pessimism is echoed by later post-structuralist researchers.

In his study, Sosteric observed a shift in the nightclub from a version of responsible autonomy to an attempt to exert direct control. At the beginning of his time at the club, staff and servers were allowed to develop 'highly personalised service styles' (1996: 301). This included an 'unceremonious' attitude to the removal of difficult customers who

harassed waitresses or otherwise showed little respect to staff. However, the clientele seemed to appreciate this non-standardised service and the club was extremely popular. There were good relations between customers and staff, a low turnover of staff, a high degree of consumer loyalty and repeat business, and good job security. Training in the working practices of the club was provided informally in after-work staff gatherings. Serving staff formed an extremely tight knit relationship with each other. Sosteric provides a summary of work in the club.

Clearly, employees enjoyed considerable control, responsibility and autonomy. Direct forms of control were almost never exercised against tenured staff. It is of course possible to argue that this was because the employees had internalised the mechanisms of control. But the success of the system was based primarily on its ability to balance the needs of the staff with those of the organisation. The organisation itself enjoyed long-term success and a degree of market security unusual in this type of service business that normally is characterised by short life-spans. (305)

However, these more individualised forms of service led to some complaints from customers. These were directed further up the hierarchy to upper management, who were not involved directly in the nightclub, but who worked for the small hotel chain that housed the club. On the grounds of 'quality' and the need for 'attitude adjustment' on the part of staff, a new manager was introduced who brought in increasingly direct control of the work carried out in the nightclub. All intermediary supervisory positions such as head waitress, head bartender and head doorman were eliminated, concentrating power in the hands of the manager and assistant manager. Performance was closely monitored, including by covert observation, and, in order to gauge the appropriateness of responses, via deliberate provocation of staff by hired visitors. The response of staff to these new measures of direct control was to withdraw 'authentic emotional exchange and substitute it with the minimum level of superficial agreeability' (309), a form of industrial sabotage that resulted in the disintegration of the sociable character of work in the nightclub.

Sosteric recognises that the relations between labour and management in this nightclub were always 'asymmetric' and that working relations involved the construction of subjectivity on the part of workers, in the interests of making profit for nightclub owners. He also takes the view that the very nature of the nightclub ('a sexual marketplace') may involve exploiting the individualism and even isolation widespread in modern societies. Once 'socialised' into the nightclub, workers were prepared to put up with a number of questionable aspects of the club. While conceding all these aspects, however, Sosteric argues that, perhaps especially in jobs involving extended social interaction by workers, the codification and standardisation of behaviour can have negative consequences for workers - and indeed for capitalists (after all, the club's business fell apart with the introduction of direct control).

This study provides some useful context for understanding creative labour in the cultural industries. By no means all such work offers the high levels of control, responsibility and autonomy to be found in the Canadian nightclub, but much of it does. Sosteric reminds us, through his close study, that these can be genuinely desirable aspects of work, with positive consequences not only for employees and for owners. The problem that remains though, both for creative labour and other forms of labour that offer relatively high levels of autonomy, might be put as follows. Is autonomy a mechanism to distract

workers' attention from the 'real' exploitation and alienation lying beneath the surface of their working life?<sup>iv</sup> Friedman's Marxian analysis resulted in a 'yes' to this question. As we shall see shortly, other, more recent writers, influenced by post-structuralism, take a related but different approach. The positive elements of work are seen in effect as compensatory mechanisms, or even as forms of 'seduction'.

### 3. Self-realisation as a Feature of Good Work?

We now turn to the other key concept to be investigated here. In our era, a commonly understood feature of good work is its potential to be part of our own personal well-being or development. Indeed, this might be said to be the underlying theme of the sociology of work, from quantitative studies of job satisfaction (Green 2006) to ethnographic studies of the difficulty of combining work with life (Hochschild 1997), to interactionist reflections on the nature of careers (Hughes 1971) to the role of work in building a sense of identity over time (Sennett 1998). I cannot do justice to this vast literature here. A term widely used for these aspects of work that I want to offer as a point of departure for understanding the relationship of (creative) labour to well-being or the good life is *self-realisation*. I say 'point of departure' because, like autonomy, the phrase is surrounded by problems, and yet potentially also has the ability to open up questions concerning desirable features of work, and of life more generally.

The English term has its roots in translations of Hegelian ideas about humanity's historical achievement of its own potential, and has come to refer to 'the fulfilment by one's own efforts of the possibilities of development of the self' (the OED's definition). This concept has much deeper roots than the term. Articulated by philosophers such as Rousseau and John Stuart Mill, it is a core goal of enlightenment thought. Its legacies are apparent in Freudian psychoanalysis, which sought to increase the individual's understanding and awareness for the sake of the development of the self. By the mid twentieth century, however, the idea of self-realisation had become attached to popular therapy movements that some writers see as deeply bound up with problematic forms of individualism (Illouz 2007: 45). The humanist psychologist, Abraham Maslow placed 'self-actualisation'—realising one's own personal talent or potential—at the top of his famous hierarchy of needs: when other more basic needs (physiological needs, needs for security, love and esteem) were met, then self-actualisation, 'the desire to become more and more what one is', could serve as a motivating force for human action.<sup>v</sup> The problem is that in contemporary culture, concepts of self-realisation and, in particular, self-actualisation are often not far removed from narcissistic forms of competitive individualism. Life coaching guru Anthony (Tony) Robbins for example offers books, recordings and classes that use the concept of self-actualisation to show us 'how to awaken the giant within' (Robbins 1992). To add confusion, the concept of self-realisation is also widely used by religious and spiritualist movements, where the aim often appears to be a fantasy of self-mastery, or elsewhere something closer to self-abnegation in the face of materialism (for example, in the thought of Ivan Illich). It is possible then to see a focus on self-realisation as mere evidence of a 'culture of narcissism' (Lasch, 1980). The German social theorist Axel Honneth has argued that increasingly, in the twentieth century, 'members of Western societies were compelled, urged or encouraged, for the sake of their own future, to place their very selves at the centre of their own life-planning and practice' (Honneth, 2004: 469). As a result, individual self-realisation becomes linked to 'institutionalized expectations' and 'transmuted into a support of the system's legitimacy' (467).

Do such developments make self-realisation irredeemable? Not necessarily (and



Honneth, for example, would not claim that it has). The concept of self-realisation need not be an example of out-of-control narcissism or competitive individualism. Progressive collectivist political projects generally involve some kind of notion of self-realisation. The Marxian philosopher Jon Elster (1986: 83) claims, for instance, that while Marx thought that communism would be better than capitalism for a number of reasons, he condemned the latter ‘mainly because it frustrated human development and self-actualization’. Communism was a society in which people could ‘fully realize their potential as all-round creators’. Nor does the appropriation of the term by business diminish its importance in understanding human life. The fundamentally ambivalent achievements of psychoanalysis (Zaretsky, 2004) include an emphasis on the pursuit of healthy self-realisation, and at its best this can involve working towards a reflexive understanding of the limits on this goal. My aim is not to advocate a Marxian or psychoanalytical concept of self-realisation, but to point out that the term need not be linked to competitive individualism or narcissistic fantasies about human development. It can serve as the basis of ethical discussions concerning the place of work, and of creative labour, within conceptions of the good life.

These issues are addressed by Douglas Ezzy in an article that attempts to take up the ‘problem of how to adequately conceptualise the difference between work that is “alienating” or “liberating” (1997: 429)—his language for what I am presenting as the broader problem of distinguishing between good and bad work. To do so, Ezzy turns to the philosophy of Simone Weil. For Weil as for Marx, pay and conditions are only part of the problem of work. But whereas Marx addresses the problem of meaningful or meaningless work through the concept of alienation, Weil conceives the problem in terms of the way that the organisation of contemporary work ‘prevents the worker understanding or experiencing the task as a dignified use of his or her faculties’ (438). Highly routinised work is oppressive because the work is performed out of *fear*, ‘rather than within the framework of an awareness of the purpose or value of the task’ (439). Good work, then, in Ezzy’s gloss of Weil, involves work being part of a life narrative in which current activities promise to lead into a desired and valued future—a particular conception of self-realisation through labour. Importantly, this requires a cultural and social context in which shared cultural discourses construct the work as worthwhile; and in which work provides the worker with the opportunity to fulfil commitments to other people and society in general.

This emphasis on a *context* of meaningfulness is linked by Ezzy to a theory of the subject derived from hermeneutics, especially the work of Paul Ricoeur, which considers what constitutes ‘a good life’, including an ethical life. Reflexive narration (if only to oneself rather than to others) is key to this, for it can provide a sense of connectedness and temporal unity to a person’s life. In articulating this vision of selfhood, Ricoeur, for Ezzy, captures a middle ground between conceptions of identity and work that place too much emphasis on agency, and those that overly emphasise the linguistic and contextual sources of the self. This, then, is a particular notion of work as part of a human project of self-realisation. But it is grounded in a sociological appreciation of problems of constraint and freedom, structure and agency. Ezzy is seeking to move beyond a dilemma in Marxian and post-Marxian labour process research, whereby ‘the person tends to be either depicted as a passive reflection of social structure, or as an active autonomous subject resisting the influence of oppressive social forces’ (1997: 428).

#### **4. A Poststructuralist Critique of Autonomy and Self-realisation at Work**

I now turn to a critique of the articles by Sosteric and Ezzy by two poststructuralist

researchers Damien O'Doherty and Hugh Willmott (2001).<sup>vi</sup> The immediate goal is to defend the taking of any normative position in relation to labour. But in doing so, I also seek to explore further the concepts of self-realisation and autonomy that, in my view, represent potentially valuable normative concepts for the study of creative labour.

O'Doherty and Willmott accuse Sosteric of paying insufficient attention to the contradictions involved in worker autonomy and offering only 'a familiar labour process meta-narrative' where the work of employees is deskilled and degraded. According to O'Doherty and Willmott, this is the narrative underlying Braverman's 1974 account of the general history of capitalist work in the twentieth century, and they see this as underpinning Sosteric's much more specific account. They accuse Sosteric of seeing power as something that is exercised only during the phase of direct control, and not the phase of work in the nightclub where considerable autonomy was given to staff. They also claim that post-structural analysis is much more fruitful than this unsophisticated approach, because it 'understands power relations to be co-implicated with existential concerns and identity, together with the economics of managing the employment relation' (470). Sosteric, in O'Doherty and Willmott's view, 'seems to ignore the extent to which employees were already disciplined by their own sense of self-identity during the period preceding the imposition of rigid criteria of service'; and he shows 'no appreciation of how employees may become entranced by an idea of themselves as independent subjects'.

O'Doherty and Willmott do not criticise Sosteric on the grounds of inaccuracy or implausibility. Rather their critique is of his failure to see that what he presents as a 'reasonably successful and harmonious workplace' was in fact a kind of illusion: the employees were being disciplined by their own sense of self-identity, their naïve notions that they were actually enjoying their work more; they were, in O'Doherty and Willmott's words, 'entranced'. No evidence specific to the nightclub is provided to support this interpretation, so this claim is presumably based then on one of two possible views that O'Doherty and Willmott hold about the employees observed by Sosteric. The first, indicated in the extracts quoted above, is that (seemingly) all employees in capitalist modernity are *entranced* in this way, *seduced* by an illusion of freedom. The second is that the workers' pleasure in their work during the first phase of relative autonomy was based on a problematic self-identity that somehow made them more vulnerable to the changes that came later. This is indicated when O'Doherty and Willmott write that the nightclub workers were 'ill prepared' to resist the later changes that challenged their earlier sense of independence, because 'they were mesmerised by a sense of autonomy that was formed prior to their employment at the club'. What is striking about this critique of Sosteric (and his nightclub workers) is the seeming impossibility of any hope of good work in capitalist modernity. The quality of any apparently good job, it seems, is in reality based on a seductive illusion of freedom. The possibility of a good life for anyone in this highly disciplined society seems even more distant. For all workers are, apparently, entranced by their own sense of personal self-identity and autonomy.

Ezzy too comes in for a hammering from O'Doherty and Willmott. Claiming that he sees the context in which work is done as determining whether employment is experienced as 'good work' or as alienating and degrading, O'Doherty and Willmott accuse Ezzy of relying on an 'analytical disjuncture' between, on the one hand, work and on the other, 'the shared social context that provides the resources and opportunities within which work can be made dignified'. '[T]he seemingly benign language of "good work"', they say, attempts to reconcile and seal a traditional sociological dualistic division

– between work and a broader social context. That division is ‘the product of a more profound theoretical intolerance towards thinking the processual, the complex and the paradoxical’ (472).

This is important for our present concerns because O’Doherty and Willmott are taking Ezzy to task for the way in which he attempts to develop an account of ‘good work’, and in particular the way in which work might fit, or fail to fit, into self-realisation—in Ezzy’s terms a person’s more or less coherent sense of their own subjectivity over a lifetime. The main issue here is not so much the degree to which the particular account of subjectivity used by Ezzy, based on a notion of ‘narrative identity’ derived from Ricoeur, is fruitful or not. More significant in the present context is the way in which O’Doherty and Willmott’s post-structuralist analysis seem to swat aside *any* discussion of the possibility of good work in relation to an individual’s sense of its value and meaning. Their basis for doing so is thin. For they are not at all clear why the idea that the meaning of work for individuals might be affected by its context – the way in which broader social formations may interpret that work as more or less meaningful—fails to address ‘process, complexity and paradox’. Rather, they rely on the following description of what their preferred theories, Althusserian Marxism, post-structuralism and deconstruction, are able to provide instead:

an analysis of ‘the subtle inter-articulation and relational tensions that lie between the “macro” and the “micro”, the “part” and the “whole”, or “work” and the cultural and social context’ that comes before the category definition and entity stabilisation in the volatility of agency-in-action. If we avoid the challenge of thinking in—and of—this fathomless space, a space moreover of struggle and strife—we risk accepting the restrictive ontology of dualistic categories that occludes and closes down the unformed swarm of social activity diffuse across the labour process.

Such attacks on dualisms are a common feature of post-structuralist writing (though not always written in jargon as opaque as this). However, distinctions of the kind listed by O’Doherty and Willmott are not necessarily ‘restrictive’ in and of themselves, as is implied here. Indeed, they are often valuable, even crucial, for cogent social analysis (see Layder 1997: 165; Archer 1995). What’s more, at no point does Ezzy deny that there are ‘tensions’ between work and its context. In fact, his argument seems precisely to concern such tensions.

O’Doherty and Willmott go further. They find Ezzy guilty of relying on a notion of a sovereign rational individual, one that is problematised by poststructuralist writers, especially Foucault. This is because, according to them, Ezzy has a conception in which ‘[t]hrough the exercise of reflexive self-consciousness the individual acts as the sole obligatory point of passage, or bridge, between the experience of degradation and meaningful, dignified, self-worth’ (2001: 472). In this erroneous conception, good work ‘is something that is possible through the subjective will-to-power of individuals and collectives who, it is implied, are capable of constructing, by means of negotiation and dialogue, a re-envisioned Habermasian style project of socio-political utopia’ (472).

But I can find no evidence of such utopianism (whether Habermasian or otherwise) in Ezzy’s piece. In fact, Ezzy clearly acknowledges the limitations on subjects imposed by discourse and social location, and he does so in ways that suggest complexity and paradox, using Ricoeur to attempt to mediate between overly determinist and overly

voluntaristic accounts of subjectivity. Rather than offering utopias, he is discussing how we might conceive of good and bad work in relation to human subjectivity. O'Doherty and Willmott seem to be over-reacting to a conception that invokes *any* sense of the possibility of work being good at all, and *any* sense of agency or a valuable reflexive self-consciousness. They seem to confuse the discussion of individual experience itself with adherence to a particular conception of individuality or personhood.

## 5. The Problem of Normativity

Again, as with their critique of Sosteric, it becomes very hard to see to see what for O'Doherty and Willmott might constitute 'good' and 'bad' work in modern societies, or even work that is something less than dreadful. O'Doherty and Willmott's response to Ezzy's account of 'good work' is to claim that some rather vaguely stated abstract categories ('the processual, the complex and the paradoxical') are missing from his account, without explaining at all clearly where they might appear in an alternative critical account. It is also hard to see what conception of human agency and action they might have, given their rather unfair critique of Ezzy's supposed reliance on the notion of a sovereign rational individual and their view of Sosteric's workers as inevitably and always mesmerised by their own desire for autonomy. This seems to be a poststructuralist version of a certain Marxist viewpoint. Whereas a crude Marxism would resist the idea that there could be any 'good work' under capitalism's exploitative relations of production (Friedman's original piece seems to come close to this) O'Doherty and Willmott imply that the notion of the 'sovereign rational individual' held by employees similarly renders all work *equally* implicated with power.

This may be because, as admirers of Foucault, O'Doherty and Willmott are influenced by the way that Foucault's genealogical method suspends the modern liberal normative framework, which distinguishes between legitimate and illegitimate forms of power. Foucault does so in order to concentrate on how power operates (see Fraser 1989: 18-19). As Nancy Fraser suggests, to some extent this bracketing of questions of normativity is fruitful, in that it allows Foucault to bring to light important new dimensions of modern societies. But at the same time it gives rise to difficulties, ones which are very much present in the work of some of Foucault's followers. It can sometimes appear that *all* normative notions are being suspended, and not just conventional liberal ones. This problem is apparent in O'Doherty and Willmott's critique, but the problem of normativity is a more general one for critical social science. When we undertake criticism, we presumably do so because of some kind of belief that life might be made better. Yet, as Andrew Sayer (2000: 172) has remarked, critical social scientists have been 'coy about talking about values'. Sometimes values in social science are rejected on the basis of a dubious objectivism, where values are seen as beyond justification through argument because they are based on emotional, arational responses. But as Sayer observes, values need to be 'subjected to scrutiny and justified as carefully as would any explanation' (2000: 172). Sayer goes on to clarify that there are other ways in which normative questions have been refused or suppressed in critical social theory, more associated with the post-structuralism that O'Doherty and Willmott advocate, or the postmodernism that is its close relative (though many post-structuralists would vehemently deny this). One is the postmodernist view that defences of particular moral positions universalize and hence conceal the situated character of their origins. Sayer (2000: 175) points out that this is indeed a major problem with regard to normative questions. However, the criticism needs to be made in relation to specific cases, rather than used as an a priori reason for abandoning normativity. This criticism is not made successfully by O'Doherty and

Willmott.

Now it may not be the case that the cultural studies critics of creative labour above share the perspectives of O'Doherty and Willmott. But I think it is reasonable to claim that cultural studies have generally shown the strong influence of post-structuralism, that post-structuralist perspectives are highly suspicious of normative claims, and this may partly explain the lack of explicit and sustained attention to normative issues in the recent cultural studies turn to work. Cultural studies approaches have concentrated on the appropriation of positive features of work – an important issue. But the question of to what extent good work is actually available in the contemporary cultural industries has been sidelined. Research on creative labour needs to draw critically on concepts such as autonomy and self-realisation, and to assess the degree to which these features might exist in contemporary creative jobs. We should not necessarily dismiss these features as seductions, aimed at luring workers into forms of self-exploitation that serve the interests of capital or some amorphous disciplinary power. In the research I conducted with Sarah Baker (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2010) we found plentiful evidence of good features of work in the cultural industries, as well as the kinds of insecurity and self-exploitation that critics have rightly drawn attention to. The cultural industries might not provide good, meaningful work as reliably as many policy-makers claim. But such work is available there – and it remains plausible to suggest that it might be more available in making television programmes, music and magazine journalism than in other industries (see Ehrenreich 2001 for an important study of cleaning, waitressing and supermarket retail work). This raises the question of the place of cultural production within the general social division of labour – an issue I address in the next section.

## 6. Justice and Good Work

Cultural studies writers are clearly concerned with questions of justice in relation to work. Their critiques aim to show that work that has been assumed to be good is in fact bad. This raises questions about principles of justice in relation to creative labour. Like questions of normativity, these have generally been sidelined in cultural studies critiques, but I think that research on creative labour would benefit from consideration of debates regarding the distribution of work in modern societies, for reasons that I explain in this section.

A useful source of insight about questions of justice in relation to work is political philosophy. This is not to say that political philosophy, which predominantly operates within a liberal framework is always preferable as a tradition to Marxian and poststructuralist approaches. In fact, the mainstream of political philosophy has on the whole been strangely quiet about the meaning and significance of work in contemporary societies, and its major figures have had little to say about these matters. John Rawls's *Theory of Justice* (1971), the major work of political philosophy in this tradition, for example, barely mentions work (though it does, for example, question the degree to which a just society ought to reward citizens based on what they 'deserve'). Where political philosophers have addressed the subject of work, the results have often been disappointing. Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (1974), often cited as the second major book in modern liberal political philosophy, defended huge rewards for some workers (using the case of the then famous basketball player Wilt Chamberlain) on the grounds that people freely chose to give their money to see him play, and that attempts to control or redistribute inequality were assaults on the freedom and self-ownership of

those people. The example is relevant to the cultural industries where the best-paid workers are rewarded hugely, while many workers provide a reservoir of cheap and irregularly employed labour (Miège 1989). Nozick (1974: 246-50) deals with the problem of the widespread presence of bad work in modern societies by arguing that there are no way of fixing such problems that do not violate freedom. Where it produces greater efficiency, capitalism, seen by Nozick as a thoroughly rational system operating on principles of perfect information, responds to workers' desires for meaningful work by altering their organisations to make meaningful work more available. Where providing meaningful work is less efficient, workers can simply choose to give up some wages to do more meaningful work which might increase their self-esteem; Nozick gives the example of university teachers, but he might just as easily have cited creative workers.

Some political philosophers have recognised that markets might not be as able to combine freedom and entitlement as Nozick suggests. Adina Schwartz (1982) for example, noted the existence of large numbers of routine jobs in modern societies, which she found degrading to people because they did not allow humans to act as autonomous agents while performing them. This was because they gave people 'almost no opportunities for formulating aims, for deciding on means for achieving their ends, or for adjusting their goals and methods in the light of experience' (634) - a politics of self-realisation. Schwartz's quasi-Kantian critique of the limitations on freedom in much contemporary work was linked to an egalitarian politics whereby all members of society should be treated as autonomous agents. Under present conditions, inequality of access to meaningful work (that which allowed people to act as autonomous agents) prevented this from happening. But at this point the problem of utopianism raises its head. Schwartz's proposed solution was a wholesale democratic redesign of work, abolition of the detailed division of labour, and an end to the separation between mental and manual labour.

The danger is that such a move might so prioritise the fair distribution of meaningful work, or of work potentially offering high levels of self-realisation, that other important notions of the good might suffer. For example, the efficiency losses associated with such a shift might mean a significant reduction in leisure time, or in the range of goods available. For Richard Arneson (1987) approaches such as Schwartz's were examples of 'perfectionist' social criticism and this risked systematically promoting the preferences of some over the no less rational preferences of others. In modern societies, claimed Arneson, people's conception of their own good, and of their own self-realisation, is too diverse to accommodate in a state-driven plan. Arneson felt that the critique of division of labour relies on an assumption that production is to be valued above consumption. But consumption too can be an important means of self-realisation, and Arneson pointed out that people might viably choose to do less rewarding work, if it means more leisure time. After all, to gain entry and to sustain one's position in forms of rewarding and meaningful work will often involve considerable effort and determination (this is certainly true of cultural industries, which often use systems of internship that discriminate against poorer entrants). This does not mean that we should reject all forms of paternalism, whereby democratic decisions are made that many people don't like. But a position that 'recognizes many goods to be equally suitable as dominant aims for a person's life will not recommend state policies that pre-empt individual choice among these aims'. Instead, Arneson said that the best way to ensure the best balance of equality, freedom and efficiency would be the general redistribution of resources so that people could satisfy their own individual preferences, specifically an unconditional basic income for all. Whether or not such a basic income is practicable or desirable, Arneson

was surely right to point to the problem of human diversity, and to wonder whether the introduction of measures to spread meaningful work might actually diminish people's overall good.

But might there be ways in which we might begin to think about *adjustments* to the social division of labour short of imagining that it can somehow be eradicated? In a lucid article, Andrew Sayer (2009: 10) has addressed a number of possible objections to 'the idea of sharing tasks of different qualities instead of allocating complex and routine tasks to different workers'. This usefully moves the debate about division of labour on from the hope of eradicating the division between manual and mental labour that concerns utopians such as Schwartz (as well as Marxist utopians – see Badiou 2007: page). Sayer deals with three objections to such adjustments: that they would be inefficient and costly; that they would be unfeasible; and that the unequal social division of labour reflects the different abilities and capacities of workers. He argues that the inefficiency objection has been partly undermined by the failures of Taylorist practices and the (partial) success of some experiments where routine and complex work is more evenly shared. It is also partly undermined by the fact that the unequal social division of labour often reflects the hoarding of privileges rather than the pursuit of efficiency (cf Tilly 1998). Sayer concedes the feasibility argument when it comes to the most skilled kinds of work, but he asks whether the routine aspects of skilled work really need to be devolved to others, given that this is likely to be less rewarding for the 'assistant', for whom the job is not part of a complete job, than for the skilled person. What's more, for skilled people to do occasional routine work (say, a group of musicians cleaning up the studio after they have used it) might 'prevent them becoming arrogant and unappreciative of the privilege of being allowed to be excused the greater part of the routine work' (Sayer 2009: 10). Finally, the unequal abilities objection 'reflects a naïve conception of the origin of differences in abilities' (Sayer 2009: 11). Sayer uses Adam Smith's remarks on the stupefying effects of the division of labour, and educational research to show that 'abilities are largely a product of socialisation and activities' (citing Gomberg 2007). As well as these factors undermining objections to reforming the social division of labour, Sayer outlines some consequences of the present social division of labour that may override them.

Is it 'efficient' – or socially just – to restrict the development of large numbers of individuals' skills by confining them to routine work? Is it 'efficient' or just to deny them the recognition that complex work can bring and the self-esteem that tends to follow from that? (Sayer 2009: 12)

The relevance of all this to creative labour is two-fold. First, in spite of the difficult conditions faced by many creative workers, many of them gain considerable pleasure and self-esteem from the recognition that this work allows (see Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2010). But who gets these jobs? Creative workers tend to be highly educated, to come from middle class backgrounds, and it has been difficult for non-white workers to gain access to the most prestigious sectors of the cultural industries. This depends on the wider patterns of inequality, including the general social division of labour, and the distribution of routine and complex tasks across different social groups. Those concerned with equality and social justice need to consider ways in which access to the means of cultural production might be broadened in order to make these forms of pleasure and self-esteem more widely available to other sectors of the population.

Second, within the cultural industries themselves, there is a division of labour, with some

people taking on more of the creative, demanding, challenging but also rewarding work, especially that around symbol making and craft skills, and others involved in 'humdrum' (Caves 2000), routine tasks. To repeat the earlier example, someone has to clear up after musicians and producers use a recording studio. We may not want to argue for government regulations that require people to clean up after themselves, even though many parents of teenage children would vote for such a measure in a referendum. But we may want to argue strongly for a shift in social conventions so that it might be considered a matter of social shame to leave mess for the less privileged to tidy up. And of course cleaning here stands for a whole set of routine tasks that are generally granted little esteem in modern societies. Here the broader question of the gender division of labour is, as in many other cases regarding work, absolutely crucial (see Ehrenreich's study, cited above, among many others).

We have been using Sayer's arguments to claim that an adjustment in the social division of labour in the interests of spreading good and bad work may well be desirable, and is not necessarily utopian. Returning to Arneson's objections, another strategy we might adopt to move beyond 'perfectionism' is to look at which political-economic and cultural systems produce good working experiences and products. Russell Keat (2008) has argued that Arneson's market socialist perspective may be too reliant on a neo-classical conception of the market. An important aspect of Arneson's argument is that states ought to be neutral regarding different conceptions of good work. Keat uses comparative political economy to show that, even under contemporary conditions, as opposed to some projected better economic system, there are different varieties of capitalism with different institutional characters, and these varieties differ in the degree to which they can offer 'good work'. Keat cites Hall and Soskice (2001) to claim that 'co-ordinated market economies' such as Germany have been able to offer, to a greater degree than the Anglo-American market liberal model, workplaces with 'autonomy from close monitoring', 'opportunities to influence the decisions of the firm', a high level and range of skills and so on – all features of good and meaningful work, according to a wide range of definitions. This means that there are political choices to be made about which institutional arrangements are most likely to encourage fairness and at what cost, and this cannot be simply be left to some monolithic entity known as the market. This undermines Arneson's preference for welfarism and his critique of perfectionism, and suggests the desirability of an approach that requires political debate to take into account ethical questions regarding the human good, and how it might be realised through work.

### **Conclusion: Good Cultural Work**

This takes us back to the earlier argument for greater attention to normativity in debates about creative labour. Poststructuralist studies of management and organisations, and cultural studies critiques of creative labour, raise the important possibility that autonomy and self-realisation might be used as techniques for control, by making negative features of work bearable and even (on balance) desirable for workers. Yet autonomy and self-realisation should not be abandoned as normative criteria for evaluating work because of this danger, and in this article I have defended these concepts. In the final section, I argued that recent debates about creative labour have also marginalised questions of justice, and I indicated some ways in which debates in political philosophy about work and justice might be relevant to analysis of work in the cultural industries.

### **Notes**



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<sup>i</sup> By which Terranova meant unpaid work, rather than work not undertaken under conditions of slavery or serfdom, which is how the term ‘free labour’ has been more generally used.

<sup>ii</sup> Banks (2007) makes a significant advance in this respect, by setting both critical theory and governmentality perspectives on cultural work against the more optimistic perspectives of what he calls ‘liberal-democratic readings of modernization’ (2007: 95).

<sup>iii</sup> ‘[A]utonomy is not born of freedom from others, the mistaken view that MacIntyre attributes to Nietzsche, Sartre and much liberal thinking’ (Breen 2007: 400).

<sup>iv</sup> For a cogent and helpful analysis of the specific meanings of autonomy in relation to cultural labour, see the article by Mark Banks in this special issue, and also Banks 2007 and Ryan 1992.

<sup>v</sup> Creativity was tied closely to this. As Maslow himself put it, ‘the concept of creativeness and the concept of the self-actualizing, fully human person seem to be coming closer and closer together, and may perhaps turn out to be the same thing’ (Maslow 1971, quoted in Illouz 2007: 45).

<sup>vi</sup> Willmott has been a leading figure in critical management studies for many years.

### **Biographical note**

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## Notes