5 Absentee workers

Representation and participation in the cultural industries

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Introduction

As the problems of cultural labour markets become more apparent, an appropriate political response seems elusive. Should public policy, as it does in the UK, continue to concentrate on issues of access to the labour market (via apprenticeships, regulated internships and so on), without concerning itself about working conditions within the cultural industries? Can workers' organizations, either those based on precarity[1] or established trade unions, reverse the tide of disorganized capitalism in these sectors? Who represents cultural industry workers in these debates?

As Banks and Hesmondhalgh (2009) comment, public policy has tended to ignore or gloss over the problems of cultural labour markets, in part at least because of the assumption that such work is inherently good (desirable, enjoyable and so on). For many of those supporting the development of the cultural industries, whether as part of regional or urban economic development schemes, or in practice-based settings – teaching in community arts, drama, music and so on – the idea of cultural work as 'good work' is held dear (Rimmer 2009).

The concern of those involved in such initiatives has often been with securing representation within these labour markets for women, ethnic minorities and working-class people. This may have been informed in part by an idealized notion of this work, but it was primarily driven by other factors. For those concerned with economic development in regions facing mass unemployment, cultural work was 'rooted' work, tied to, and in some ways expressive of place, and capable of producing long-term employment in an age when, as Andrew Ross puts it, industrial restructuring has not been 'kind to the cause of secure or sustainable livelihoods' (Ross 2009: 20).

However, it was also animated, in a way peculiar to cultural work, by the importance of voice, the idea that involvement in cultural production cannot be confined to the elite, if there is to be any hope of a more democratic culture or indeed society. Who gets to make culture, in its widest sense from advertisements to TV news bulletins and situation comedies, matters, because it is how we understand ourselves as a society. The origins of cultural

industries policy in the UK lies in the 'municipal socialism' of cities like Sheffield, Manchester and London, where the aim was, as Peck puts it, 'to pluralize the sphere of cultural distribution and consumption, to broaden access to cultural markets and to cultural work, and to recognize the creativity of marginalised social groups' (Peck 2011: 47).

Yet in the decades since the first cultural industry initiatives the marginalization of women, ethnic minorities and the working class from participation in cultural labour markets has grown, not declined (Skillset 2009). The politics of cultural industries policy making has shifted from municipal socialism to neoliberal urbanism (Peck 2011), albeit it in a variety of forms (Larner and Craig 2005). Changes in the wider organization of capitalism, post-Fordism in particular, which for some appeared to hold out the promise of better working conditions, are part of this story. Alongside that, the virtual exclusion of the politics of labour from the policy-making process allowed the development of a discourse of 'representation' in the workforce that paid no attention to questions of working conditions. The result of that is the development of a highly unrepresentative cultural sector, with often poor working conditions.

The chapter draws on the experience of the UK, particularly in the last 30 years or so, but it is part of a much wider international debate. The popularity of cultural industries as an economic development strategy is now global (Cunningham 2007), as are the growing movements of young people, both precariously employed and unemployed, and of students, who wish to work in these industries.

The trouble with work

The development of cultural industries policy in the UK, and thus the realizations of these ideas about the nature of work, took place under a government – the modifier 'New' notwithstanding – that derived its existence from the labour movement (Oakley 2011). Parties of the 'centre left', from Brazil's *Partido dos Trabalhadores*, to the German SPD (Social Democratic Party) have been, if anything, keener on promoting the development of cultural industries than their counterparts on the right.

I have argued elsewhere (Oakley 2011) that in the case of the British Labour Party, this reflects the centrality of work to much of the New Labour project.[2] In part this was a response to what was regarded as a shameful tolerance of long-term unemployment and its social consequences by the previous Conservative government, but beyond this, a reformed labour market was believed by New Labour to offer political success in a variety of areas. At the 'top' of the labour market skills were seen as the key to improving Britain's economic competiveness, while the answer to the problems of poverty and social exclusion at the 'bottom' was believed to be via integration into the labour market. Throughout society, higher skills were seen to be linked to adaptability and resilience, helping to produce the neoliberal subject, who

could not only cope with, but also thrive on, the sort of changes that the economy was understood to be delivering (Seltzer and Bentley 1999; Gibson and Klocker 2005).

Despite this emphasis, however, questions about *quality* of work, work organization and control of working lives rarely troubled New Labour. A minimum wage was introduced for the first time in the UK; there were some changes to the previous government's anti-union legislation[3] and statutory paid paternity leave was launched, alongside slightly improved maternity leave. However, issues of workers' control and ownership and the democratization of economic decision making, which had been a prominent feature of Labour Party discussions in the 1970s and 1980s (Thompson 2002), were regarded as anachronistic, if they were acknowledged at all. Indeed the current revival in the UK of interest in cooperatives and other forms of mutual ownership, owes as much to sections of the paternalistic or 'red' Tories (the UK Conservatives), as it does to Labour or the trade unions (Norman 2008; Blond 2009, 2010).

A long-term debate on the left would see this resulting from a widespread, if not universal, decoupling of political parties of the left from the labour movement. From a Marxist point of view, this represents a fundamental loss of faith in the working class as the primary agent of the progress towards socialism, and the replacement of its crucial role with the politics of identity and social movements (Wood 1986). For others it was a necessary adaptation to the alleged 'withering away' of the working class, at least in the global North (Hobsbawm 1981).

For the New Left, the need to develop a political movement beyond white, male trade unionists was not only necessitated, but also facilitated, by changes in the structure of capitalism. As a consequence of this, work lost its centrality in the politics of the left, a change that would have implications for all workers, and indeed for those who defined their politics in other ways, such as in terms of anti-globalization or as social justice. Not the least of these was the collapse in the spending power of working people and concomitant rise in personal debt, which underlie so much of the continuing financial crisis.

Alongside this, I would argue, is a change in the idea of what good work and particularly good creative work means. As a 'patron saint' of the British Labour Party (MacCarthy 1994), William Morris is often credited with informing its ideas about 'good work' (Morris 1884). While distrust of 'profit mongering', as Morris called it, never ran that deeply in the Labour Party, his notion of the working life as a source of education, and of the inseparability of mental and manual work, both described and predicted the experience of the labour movement as a counterculture, which concerned itself not only with daily working conditions, but with the education, recreation and self-expression of an entire class (Wills and Simms 2004; Mason 2007). One can sees echoes of such views through a variety of forms of workers' education, the community arts movement of the post-war period, and in what is

sometimes called the non-formal learning sector (NFLS) today (Samuel 2006; Sefton-Green 2008; Rimmer 2009).

While daily working conditions under Fordism were anathema to all that Morris would have promoted, it was its collapse that brought an end to a labour movement that could ensure, albeit partially and highly unequally, levels of security and links to training and education that could in part compensate for an often brutal daily reality. The criticism of this 'gas and water' socialism was that the notions of mutuality and self-sufficiency that had animated Victorian reformers had been sacrificed for efficient economic growth and a social wage (Bevir 2011). However, while the collapse of Fordism produced a new and optimistic narrative about work in some parts of the left, one where the flexible, skilled worker could be made to look like Morris's well-rounded and independent artisan (Kelly 1982), the loss of collective power that ensued drove rapidly widening inequality and helped to produce today's fragmented insecurity. It also produced an account of labour markets from which class issues could be safely excised.

A new dawn? The post-Fordist labour market

Noel Thompson has characterized the enthusiasm in some sections of the left for what was believed, from the 1970s onwards, to be the changing nature of work as 'post-Fordist socialism' (Thompson 2002). 'Flexible specialization', that is, firm strategies based on multi-use equipment, highly skilled workers and strategies of competition through innovation, appeared to some thinkers on the left as a re-valorization of work and workers, not a diminishing of them. Such attitudes were highly influential on the British Labour Party as it reconstructed itself during the 1980s and 1990s, and indeed fed into many 'cultural industry' debates of that period and later.

Robin Murray (1988) argued that post-Fordism saw labour as the key asset of modern production, while others argued that it produced 'flatter', less hierarchical workplaces, allowing both productivity gains and the development of a more contented workforce (Sabel 1982; Handy 1995). We can see this sort of language directly echoed in later writers on the 'creative economy', such as Florida (2002).

Such expertise, 'knowledge of industrial processes, markets, even the character of key personnel', is what Paul Hirst called 'intimate knowledge' (Hirst 1989: 276). It was deemed vital to the triumph of the post-Fordist enterprise, relying, as it often did, on tacit, embedded forms of know-how, particularly suited to small firms in specific locales. Economic success was seen to depend not on 'cut throat competition among atomistic entrepreneurs', but on a complex set of sub-contracting relationships that both required and engendered high levels of trust and cooperation (Zeitlin 1989: 369).

Some went so far as to claim that the post-Fordist production paradigm means that democratization of industry became essential, and that workers who 'experience a sense of empowerment and responsibility at work that was

denied them under conditions of mass production' could be expected to take a greater interest in community and wider political affairs (Mathews 1989: xiv). In this way, the goals of economic (and wider) democracy could be allied to economic revitalization, both of the firm and, ideally, the region or nation in which it was situated.

For a time at least, this notion of post-Fordism was allied to a debate about ownership and participation at work. Opening up company boards to worker involvement, amending company law to broaden the accountability of boards of directors and mandate wider social goals, enshrining rights to training and education, the promotion of worker co-operatives: these and other matters were advocated by some post-Fordists (Hirst 1989; Mathews 1989; Kelly 1982). All this tapped into a long history on the left, but it was a history that was often recast as being free from the failures associated with statism and Keynesian economic policies. The decentralization of economic activity away from the head offices of large corporations was seen as being paralleled by a decentralization of economic policy making away from national governments to regions, and the diffusion of industrial relations negotiations from the national offices of the 'big' trade unions, directly to the skilled workforces in the local firm.

However, this discourse often appeared to have little to say about the larger international context in which such developments were taking place. The growth in international capital movements during the 1980s and 1990s, and the resulting increased volatility of the global economic system, together with the growing power of transnational organizations, was largely ignored by some post-Fordists on the left, preoccupied as they were with the local and the regional, the idea that the future belonged to the small, the flexible and the deeply embedded. Peck (2011: 49) argues that in the case of the Greater London Council (GLC) at least,[4] the cultural industries project was simply terminated too early, 'leaving unresolved a series of searching questions concerning its political-economic sustainability'.

The degree to which its interventions into elements of cultural production and distribution could ever have been 'scaled-up' to a national level remains unanswerable, but as cultural industry schemes drifted into 'creative industry' policies for urban regeneration, concerns about issues such as media ownership, access to distribution chains or intellectual property were dealt with in a way entirely consistent with neoliberal, deregulatory approaches, with little attempt to intervene on behalf of national or local firms (Garnham 2005; Hesmondhalgh 2005).

The role of the national state or local government in this vision was essentially a permissive one, helping to equip local firms and local workers to compete in what was seen as the real agent of change – the market. As Thompson has commented, responding to customer demand in this way was seen as the surest way to ensure high-quality products that demanded skill and imagination in their production (Thompson 2002). The Morrisonian craftsman may have come back into fashion, but his idea that good creative

work can only be realized in producing useful things, not in adding to over-consumption, fitted less well with the spirit of the times.

Not at the table – organized labour and the cultural industries

In this *zeitgeist*, trade unions, for so long the active agent of change in the labour movement, were relegated to a subsidiary role. Levels of unionism were relatively low in many of the craft-based firms so beloved of post-Fordists, and small, geographically scattered workplaces made unionization difficult. The distinctions between more highly skilled craft labour and other, more casualized, sub-contracted labour, were often strong, even in the paragon regions of post-Fordism such as Emilia Romagna (Thompson 2002).

Some post-Fordist writers sought to draw distinctions between 'continental' European unions, who they argued were in favour of 'job enrichment' processes, and those in the UK who preferred the 'comforting incantation' that capital puts profits before people, and were not persuaded by talk of the more humane workplace (Kelly 1982: 15). In such cases it was suggested, unions had 'a fatalistic attitude to the prospect of progressively reforming work' (Kelly 1982: 16), preferring to concentrate on maintaining wage levels or the re-grading of particular types of work.

In the cultural industries, the debate was somewhat differently framed. When alighting on these sectors as part of the 'new economy', the discussion of boring, repetitive or demeaning work was largely absent. This was depicted as useful work, not useless toil. However, here too the decline of unionization is a major part of the story of work. The cultural industries, particularly when grouped under the looser heading of 'creative industries' have always had differing levels of unionization, with the media sectors such as journalism and broadcasting traditionally heavily unionized, alongside some performing arts such as acting. Other activities, from crafts and visual arts on one hand, to advertising and architecture on the other, have been much less so. The largely self-employed character of individual makers in the arts is one reason; those in creative services such as advertising, design and so on more resemble 'knowledge-based' workers such as IT professionals in having relatively low levels of unionization.

The story of declining union representation in the cultural industries as they reconstructed themselves along post-Fordist lines is well told (Christopherson and Storper 1989; Ursell 1998, 2000). Such changes made it easier not only to celebrate the cultural industries as archetypal new economy sectors (Cunningham 2002), but also to conduct policy conversations in which the issues of labour – working conditions and hours, access to training, ownership and control – were easily ignored.

In its New Labour incarnation, engagement with trade unions was a minimal part of cultural-industry policy making. As Hesmondhalgh and Pratt (2005) pointed out, one of the problems of cultural industry policy making from the beginning was 'the intertwined story that we are told of the

development of the cultural industries as big businesses and the development of local and national cultural industries policy'.

In other words, policy was supposed to deal with both multinational organizations and single artists. In practice, given that most of the work was carried out at the regional and local level, the cultural businesses in question were generally small businesses or loose networks of individuals. When real money was at stake, such as in discussions of intellectual property or broadcasting, larger rights-holders were of course party to discussions, but the 'average' cultural industry intervention was characterized by an emphasis on small firms and individuals, even if the individuals were recast as entrepreneurs, and the small firms as 'high growth'. When issues of exclusion were discussed, as they were, given the presence in cultural industry policies of ideas of social exclusion and regeneration (Oakley 2006), the representatives of such concerns were more likely to be community arts organizations or publicly funded networks,[5] rather than representatives of labour.

The 'social conscience' of the cultural industries

As Banks and others have argued (O'Connor 1998; Banks 2007; Prince 2009), local cultural industry initiatives generated a set of cultural intermediaries whose concerns often embraced wider ethical and political issues. Indeed, as the policy concept of creative industries began to circulate, more individuals become creative industries 'experts', and more clients, needing creative industry advice, were, for a while at least, created.

However, not all of these individuals or organizations were new to the game. Many had previously styled themselves as 'arts consultants' working on instrumental cultural policies linking the arts to health, education or other social amelioration projects. Some had worked within local government: the Greater London Council's cultural industries experiment was a notable source of such people. Others, those in small organizations rather than individuals, had often started life as community arts organizations. For them, the goal of helping people to work in the cultural industries was less important as a way of securing a decent livelihood, or even of regenerating declining local economies (important as that was), than it was to secure representation from marginalized groups in industries that were seen as so important to our shared understanding of ourselves.

As Rimmer (2009) argues, this particular group, many of which started life in the 1970s or before, had by this period taken a variety of organizational forms, and indeed their rationales had evolved in response to policy and funding changes. In the process, they had moved away from a focus on art making as an element of democratic cultural participation, and towards one on vocational learning. Ensuring labour market entry for those from underrepresented groups became a key goal, and what had previously been seen as supporting democratic cultural participation was recast as helping young people to find work in the cultural industries.

It was in this guise that such organizations were often agents and indeed recipients of public funding in creative industry initiatives such as the Mayor's Commission on the Creative Industries in London, which was set up in London in 2002 (Oakley 2012). While featuring a couple of representatives of big business, the Commission also featured representatives of community development organizations. Alongside the usual concerns of investment, ensuring access to affordable space, and helping small firms get intellectual property (IP) advice, there was strong emphasis within the Commission's discussions on issues of diversity (generally understood in terms of ethnicity, but also gender), and on ensuring that training and skills development was as widespread as possible to help develop a more representative labour market (LDA 2003).

It follows from this that work itself – the experience and nature of it – could not be the problem; the 'problem' was getting people into work and this involved what was often described as 'working with the grain of the sector'. Mentoring schemes, work placements and internships that would enable young people to secure the mix of freelance and unpaid work deemed vital to entering these sectors thus became part of the vocabulary and practice of community arts and similar organizations. When the egalitarian culture that was the heritage of such organizations came into conflict with the realities of a socially stratified labour market, the result was often a strong resistance to acknowledge such problems, perhaps fearing that such conversations would lead people to conclude that cultural work was best left those who could handle it, which in practice meant those with relatively high levels of cultural and economic capital.

What was at stake here was in some cases a confusion between the promotion of cultural industry growth on one hand, and improving the employment prospects of marginalized young people on the other. Though rhetoric about cultural industries has often run these two things together, there is in fact no essential relationship between them. One could easily have 'successful' cultural industries growth predicated on a narrow social basis, and indeed that is what we appear to have.

The promotion of cultural industry growth and the potential of the cultural industries to offer sustainable employment to relatively large numbers of people, at all levels of the labour market, was what motivated local authorities and regional development bodies to get involved in support schemes. However, for many of the cultural intermediaries with which, and through which, they worked, this was less important than securing representation within these sectors for voices that they felt would otherwise be silent. The policy mechanisms in which they involved themselves were essentially meritocratic and involved working within the cultural industry's often exploitative employment practices. Through a combination of industry nous and connections, mentoring schemes and work-based learning, such organizations sought to diversify the composition of the labour market in ways that ensured that it had very little to say about its 'dark side' (Neilson and Rossiter 2005).

The issue of social class exclusion was one privately acknowledged by many community arts workers and cultural industry advocates, but public discourse tended to focus on visible difference such as ethnicity, gender or disability – in part aided by the measurement of such categories in national statistics and thus the implicit permission to consider this as an issue. The result was that while many cultural industry interventions explicitly concerned themselves with questions of social inclusion, the labour market itself was not seen as a battleground. The politics of organized labour were as distant from cultural industry policy making as they were from our TV screens and our classrooms.

Absentee workers

Where participation ties into issues of representation and voice, the question of participation, who gets to be a worker in these industries, is of course vital to understanding the sort of symbolic texts our cultural industries produce and thus a major part of our self-understanding as a society. However, while there is research that looks at the representation and portrayal of class in the media and other cultural arenas (Grindstaff 2002; Skeggs 2004; Wood and Skeggs 2008), there are relatively few such studies that link this to issues of labour and participation in labour markets.

One great exception, Michael Denning's account of the US 'cultural front' in the 1930s and 1940s (Denning 1997), attempts to link working-class participation, unionization and cultural expression. He argues that the influence of labour unions and leftist politics not only ensured better representation of working-class people and better working conditions, but also shaped the popular cultural output of the time: 'for the first time in the history of the United States, a working class culture had made a significant imprint on the dominant cultural institutions' (Denning 1997: xx).

Sadly, no such account of the links between the politics of workplace organization and what Denning calls 'aesthetic ideology' (Denning 1997) exists in a British context. It is tempting to argue, though difficult to evidence, that what has been called the 'demonisation' of the working class in the British media and in popular culture in recent years (Jones 2011) can be traced to a declining level of working-class representation in these industries.

Certainly it is the case that participation in many media fields is more and more socially skewed (Sutton Trust 2006). As Robertson (2010) argues, the socially unrepresentative profile of top journalists is accompanied by the fact that workers and their representatives in the unions are rarely featured as commentators on economic affairs in any major news bulletin. The degree to which a tax change, a piece of legislation or the takeover of one firm by another is 'good for business' is often the only issue considered, while union commentators are required only when justifying an industrial dispute.

Clearly there is no simple link between representation and portrayal, any more than there is to consumption. Newspapers like *The Sun*, which feature frequent attacks on 'chavs' or 'the underclass', have a large working-class

readership, while some defence against the tide of anger at the so-called 'feral underclass' that followed the English riots of 2011 came from the bastions of high Toryism in *The Daily Telegraph* (Oborne 2011). However, it does reflect a wider culture, not only of anti-unionism but one where members of the working class are generally absent, when they are not being denigrated.

The removal of the working class from their central position in the politics of the left, whether one sees it as a political betrayal, a pragmatic adjustment to a changing society, or a welcome embrace of other forms of leftist politics (or as something else entirely), has made work a less vital political issue. Voters are addressed as consumers, taxpayers, family members and even, occasionally, citizens, but very rarely workers. As I have suggested above, this has major implications outside the workplace, not least in the rapid growth in inequality since the early 1980s (Dorling 2010); it also has implications for the development of a notion of what constitutes good work, and for the portrayal of workers and the working class in our media and wider cultural life.

In the case of the cultural industries, many of those engaged in local developments had struggled with the issue of representation for years. Ensuring a more diverse workforce was their mission. However, by failing to engage with the reality of cultural work, indeed by subscribing to the view of such work as unproblematic and desirable, they failed utterly to engage with the real nature of exclusion, which was often economic. Those who could not afford to work for low pay, or no pay, for long periods of time were often from working-class backgrounds, and on this crucial issue their intermediary representatives had very little to say.

Conclusions

The argument of this chapter is that the exclusion of work from cultural industries policy is part of a wider story of the exclusion of work and therefore the politics of work, from mainstream politics, the media and wider public discourse. In the UK, this can be seen explicitly in the policies pursued under New Labour, both at the level of central government and, perhaps more puzzling, by local authorities and voluntary groups, many of which were less than fully signed up to many aspects of the New Labour project. It is not a uniquely British story, however, but one that can be seen in many territories where the idea of the cultural industries as a source of economic growth has been embraced (Ross 2009).

The sources of this exclusion are complex and contested and no one narrative can claim to capture it all. As Banks and Hesmondhalgh have argued (2009: 416), policy documents of the time portray this work as not only desirable but also 'progressive'. It was a view, I would argue, that was shared by many of those intermediaries involved in what they would see as community-level economic development, including community arts organizations, artists' networks and informal learning organizations.

It cannot be overstated how little success there has been in terms of tackling under-representation in terms of gender, ethnicity or social class in the cultural industries, and most of the data show the problem to be getting worse rather than improving (Skillset 2009, 2010). Yet such concerns still matter. The point is that they cannot be treated in isolation from debates about quality of work, about ownership and control in the workplace and, in the case of the cultural industries, about questions of representation and portrayal.

Angela McRobbie has recently called for a renewal of 'radical social enterprise and co-operatives' in the cultural sector (McRobbie 2011: 33), and beyond the cultural industries we do seem to be witnessing a rebirth of interest in all things mutual and cooperative, even if such organizational forms remain very much in the minority. Other have argued that the current UK and other governments' interest in happiness or well-being could make workplace politics more central to policy concerns, given the evidence that work is the source of so much unhappiness or ill-being (Davies 2011). The current politics of protest, whether in the forms of the various 'Occupy' city movements, or in case of tax justice or student protest movements, clearly offer potential for alliances with the labour movement, which has already been taken up in many cases. The possibilities for making common cause between social movements and labour organizations has not seemed stronger for some time, given the economic crisis and the fear for a 'lost generation' of young, unemployed people.

However, such times can also, of course, be difficult for those campaigning for better working conditions. The cultural industries have often been held up as an indicator of the way work is going, whether that is in optimistic accounts of 'work as fun', or concerns that precarity is becoming the norm across the economy. Talking to those trying to enter the cultural sectors, particularly students in higher education, often seems to reveal a mood of resignation, combined with a lack of historical awareness of the progressive changes that were brought about workers' acting together. Social and ethical concerns are often seen by such people as a major driver of their desire to engage in cultural work; the need for these to be linked explicitly to a politics of the workplace has never been greater.

Notes

1 For example the Precarious Workers Brigade, Carrotworkers Collective, Euro-MayDay.
2 The term 'New Labour' generally refers to the British Labour government of 1997–2010. The notion of the New Labour 'project' is generally dated from Tony Blair's accession to the leadership in 1994 and refers to a process of moving the Labour Party in a rightwards, less social democratic direction.
3 The Employment Relations Act 1999 introduced statutory procedures for trade union recognition in firms with more than 20 employees, gave employees the right

to be accompanied by a trade union representative during disciplinary procedures and mildly amended the law on strike ballots.

4 The GLC was London's local government which, from 1981 to 1986, pioneered cultural industry policies the emphasis of which was firmly on culture as a source of production, and indeed of jobs for Londoners, particularly those from working-class backgrounds and ethnic minorities.

5 The New Labour period saw the establishment of a number of public-funded networks in the UK, the aim of which was to support small creative industries by a programme of events, information provision and advice.