CHAPTER 3

Cultural Work as a Site of Struggle: Freelancers and Exploitation

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1 Introduction: Missing Marx

Although once considered a blind spot of communication studies (Mosco and McKercher 2006, 493), cultural work has become a growing site of inquiry as scholars from a range of perspectives consider the work that goes into producing media, culture, and communication. Marx, however, is largely missing from these studies. On the surface, Marx’s inquiry into the characteristics of nineteenth-century industrialized production seems an outdated approach for understanding cultural work in the post-Fordist era. In Capital ([1867] 1990), Marx described conditions on the factory floor: the wage labourer with nothing to sell but that most peculiar of commodities, labour power, enters into a

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1 Definitions are contentious in studies of work and labour in the communication and cultural industries. In this chapter, by cultural workers, I refer to people who work in the cultural industries, or those industries that generate and circulate commodities that “influence on our understanding of the world” and “produce social meaning” (Hesmondhalgh 2007, 3, 12). Banks (2007, 2) defines the cultural industries as “those involved in the production of ‘aesthetic’ or ‘symbolic’ goods and services; that is, commodities whose core value is derived from their function as carriers of meaning in the form of images, symbols, signs and sounds.” I use the term culture in order to speak to the issues that arise from the association of this work with creativity and art. Precisely which sectors count as cultural industries varies. Statistics Canada (2012), for example, includes a range of occupations, from librarians and curators to writers, artists, and technical occupations in film and broadcasting. This perspective, while still somewhat broad, is useful because it views the character of cultural work through an understanding of the specificities of the industries in which it is performed rather than through the content of the work. There is something distinctive about cultural goods and their consumption that can explain why cultural production is organized in particular ways (Hesmondhalgh 2007, 101; Miège 1989; Garnham 1997). This avoids, for example, attributing experiences of cultural workers to personal character traits, which is part of the argument I develop in this chapter. The term “creative labour,” for example, draws attention to qualities specific to a person (Smith and McKinlay 2009a, 3), whereas I argue that the organization of cultural production has a structural effect on workers’ experiences, and freelance writers’ labour experiences flow directly from the logics of the industry in which they work.
“free” relationship of exploitation with an employer, who sets the worker to work. Under the capitalist’s control, the worker toils for a long stretch of the day. After earning more than what is necessary to reproduce her labour power, she generates surplus value, or profit, for capital. In the process, the worker becomes part of a generalized class of labourers. Her concrete labour is made abstract as it is sunk into standardized commodity production. Marx describes a subjugated, alienated worker who is interchangeable with other workers, rendered an anonymous input for production.

As work has moved out of the physical factory and into the studios, offices, and home-based workplaces of the creative economy, Marx’s account has either been ignored or deemed outmoded. In many cases, cultural workers are understood to be unique kinds of workers and cultural work radically different from other kinds of work, removed from traditional labour-capital antagonisms (Caves 2000; Florida 2002; Deuze 2007; Christopherson 2009). In more critical accounts, Marx is dismissed as reductive because he does not attend to workers’ agency or subjectivity (Banks 2007; Conor 2010; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011). The most prevalent critique is of Marx’s theory of alienation, which describes the worker as separated from control of the labour process, from the products she creates, from other workers, and from her own human essence (Marx [1844] 1978a). For example, Mark Banks (2007, 11) critiques a vision of cultural workers as “condemned to serve as alienated labour [...] assumed to be devoid of active subjectivity and suppressed ‘from above’ by managers and owners.” Cultural work is more often described as the antithesis of alienation: as social and collaborative work that grants workers relative autonomy in the labour process and facilitates self-expression and opportunities to engage in total human activity. Cultural workers feel great attachment to the products they create, particularly when these products carry a worker’s name, such as a novel or a film. It is difficult to reconcile Marx’s interpretation of work as an alien power, “not voluntary, but coerced” (Marx [1844] 1978a, 74), with conceptions of cultural work as highly desirable and glamorous.2

In a position I review in greater detail below, critical scholars of cultural work argue that the specificities of cultural commodities require that workers at the idea-creation stage of production be granted relative autonomy in the labour process (Ryan 1992; Banks 2010). Relative autonomy enables some cultural workers to enjoy more time, autonomy, and resources than other workers

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2 In *Capital*, Marx describes alienation not as a subjective experience, but in an objective sense, as a way of being under a mode of production organized around private property and waged labour. For Marx, workers are alienated because they do not own the means of production and must sell their labour power to survive.