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In the winter months of 1998–99, Local 802 of the American Federation of Musicians (AFM) succeeded in organizing, and securing a contract for, the part-time Jazz Program faculty in the Mannes College of Music at the New School University. Among the seventy adjunct teachers represented by the union were some venerable musicians from the world of jazz, including Chico Hamilton, leader of the famous quintet, and seasoned virtuosos, like Benny Powell and Jimmy Owens, who have played with the Count Basie and Duke Ellington orchestras.¹ Hired from year to year, often for chronically low compensation, and without any benefits or pension plan, these faculty looked to the oldest of the craft unions in the arts (founded in 1896) to muster support from community leaders and elected public officials and to win recognition from their employer through the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). The day the musicians' contract was signed, the New School also offered pensions and benefits to three thousand other nonunion adjunct faculty. While this offer was clearly aimed at forestalling any further unionization, it also exemplified the old labor maxim that “justice for one is justice for all.”

This campaign, named Justice for Jazz Artists (with its echo of the Service Employees International Union's legendary Justice for Janitors campaign of the early 1990s), may have been a microscopic landmark on the busy landscape of academic labor, but its significance radiates in many directions. In the AFM's first bid to represent musicians as teachers, the local ran what its chief organizer described to me as a “real, large-scale corporate campaign” by using the arena of public opinion. His comment conveyed pride in the newfound strength of the organizing department, which was only three years old and therefore dated from the 1996 election of the Sweeney-Trumka-Chavez-Thompson directorate of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO). In the course of the campaign, organizers appealed to the public perception that jazz greats had been denied their due desserts, historically and to this day.

Among all arts workers, jazz musicians arguably have the most visible profile as artists whose work has been most lionized by all classes of audience, and whose personal compensation has been most blatantly discounted. Indeed, the contract helped to remedy the local's own long

neglect of jazz musicians in New York City. The New School's own credibility, as an institution with a progressive pedigree, most recently soiled by headline-making student protests over the paltry minority representation on its faculty, was put to the test by this bargaining unit of primarily African American musicians. The seasoned profile of these working teachers also refuted the more typical image of underpaid adjunct faculty as fresh-faced Ph.D's facing the first, albeit prolonged, obstacles to their professional ambitions for secure employment. Most striking of all, the campaign yoked together artists and academics in ways that gave rise to some friction over whether a musicians or a teachers union ought to be representing the adjuncts.

While sectors of the performing arts have been unionized for several decades, and faculty sectors of the academy since the 1960s, both professions have been resistant, historically, to industrial-style organization, retaining a craft culture of flexible bargaining, each in its own distinctive ways. However disparate their solo career traditions, the artisan-jazzman here shares the same position and predicament as the professional academic whose labor has been degraded and deprofessionalized in recent years. What are the economic circumstances that have accelerated this degradation? As this essay seeks to argue, artistic and academic traditions extol sacrificial concepts of mental or cultural labor that are increasingly vital to newly important sectors of the knowledge industries. No longer on the margins of society, in Bohemia or the Ivory Tower, they are providing a rationale for the latest model of labor exploitation in core sectors of the new industrial order, and pioneering the workplace of tomorrow.

The Cost of Idle Curiosity

Try to imagine the response to these developments on the part of the original founders of the New School in 1919, among whom were Progressive titans like Charles Beard, Herbert Croly, Wesley Clair Mitchell, James Harvey Robinson, Thorstein Veblen, and John Dewey. They certainly supported the extension of education to trade union members, and indeed, the new institution was associated with the Workers Education Bureau of America. But the prospect of industrial-scale union organization among faculty would have been as distasteful to these scholars as the growth, now all but entrenched, of an expansive administrative bureaucracy with the managerial clout to dictate every root and branch of academic policy. They conceived the New School in large part because the wartime policies adopted by their own university administrators had demanded a fealty to college and state that offended their fierce devotion

to intellectual independence. Indeed, the Columbia University administration went so far as to reorganize its departments into military corps (the Medical Corps, the Legal Corps, the Language Corps, the Economic and Social Service Corps, etc.), and dismissed two faculty for their “antiwar” sentiments, prompting Beard, and later Robinson, to resign in a blaze of publicity.² Launched as a clear alternative to the elite condominium of service to God, country, and capital, the fledgling New School (disastrously, as it happens) would have no president, trustees, or bureaucratic cohort to constrain the free exercise of the intellect.

The most meticulous rendition of the scholarly ideal of self-governance appears in Veblen’s own “memorandum on the conduct of universities by businessmen,” *The Higher Learning in America*. In this 1919 volume, the Progressive aversion to corporate trusts and capitalist waste merges with the customary repugnance of the scholar-gentleman for a narrowly vocational approach to learning and for the utilitarian application of knowledge for financial gain. *University Control*, a similar, though less enduring, book by the psychologist James McKeen Cattell, one of the faculty fired at Columbia, analyzes a nationwide survey of responses to the growing plight of micromanaged faculty, snared between “the Scylla of presidential autocracy and the Charybdis of faculty and trustee incompetence.”³

The university ideal, according to Veblen, should be the pursuit of “Idle Curiosity,” and any treatment of knowledge as a “merchantable commodity” is a desecration of an exalted calling.⁴ Neither is Veblen’s university a fit environment for training students to pursue legal or business careers. Above all, Veblen’s book spotlights his withering opposition to the penetration of academe by the techniques of business salesmanship and advertising—all too familiar today as the corporatization of higher education in an advanced stage, with its sharp market orientation and its managerial premium on cost-effective delivery of risk-free educational product. By way of compensation, his passion for Idle Curiosity is the direct scholarly equivalent of “art for art’s sake,” so quarantined from the world of “wont and use” as to render its devotees ineffectual as economic or social actors outside of their professional sphere. This ideal of disinterestedness helped pave the way, as David Reisman later pointed out, for a “cult of incompetence” among modern academics: “proud of their inability to preside at a meeting, or turn in grade lists on time, or to remember appointments or the names of students, or to write memoranda not tainted by irrelevance.”⁵ It is a cult whose devotions still flourish today, but it is increasingly attended only by the securely tenured or tenurable, who are, even as we speak, about to become a minority in their workplaces. In its heyday, this cult was most assiduously observed in colleges patterned after the model of elite East Coast institutions living off their legacy of

pre-Jacksonian colonial hierarchies. Western universities, church-affiliated and other special-interest colleges, and land-grant institutions were more inclined to honor a community service ethos that ran counter to the self-marginalizing spirit of Idle Curiosity.

Unlike fellow Progressives (the influential engineer Morris Cooke unflinchingly recommended tenure abolition and academic Taylorism in his 1910 report, *Academic and Industrial Efficiency*), Veblen railed against the advent of cost-effectiveness in his dreamy precincts of academe *at the same time* as he called for more efficiency in industry. In the world of factories, he argued, it is the financial captains and the Vested Interests who are wasteful and who sabotage the potential of productive manufacturing. But industrial democracy, in the shape of labor power-sharing, is not the answer for Veblen. The caste of practical intellectuals that he lionizes—the engineers—promises to deliver a more rational system of production, preempting, among other things, the need for industrial workers to organize their interests against the wasteful exploitation of labor for profit.⁶ The scholar holds a similar position within the academy. Like the engineer, the scholar would be loyal to science and not beholden to business interests, and if only the customs of Idle Curiosity were properly observed, the management model of productivity quotas, so redolent of industry, could be kept safely at bay. If Veblen's faith in the pure and generous spirit of the scholar was anachronistic even in his day, and at odds with the Midwestern traditions of his own educational background, it would not become an actual *liability* to the material well-being of the academic workforce until much later in the century. In our day, the legacy of this “impecunious” credo has not only failed miserably to stave off the worst incursions of corporate mentality. Through its informal neglect of money matters, this ideal may also have actively contributed to the proletarianization of large sectors of Veblen's profession, a sizeable percentage of whom now earn compensation at or near the poverty line.

A Great Divide

Before I expand on this claim, let us consider the lot of musicians in the year when Veblen's book was published, for it is the common conditions of academic and artistic labor that I am pursuing here. By the end of World War I, the AFM had already accomplished a great deal. The union had set the first wage scales for orchestras traveling with grand operas, comic operas, musical comedies, and similar attractions. It had lobbied for congressional reform of copyright law and, in its first wave of protectionist ardor, for curtailing the unregulated admission to the United States of

foreign musicians working for lower wages. Its members had been hard hit by the wartime Cabaret Tax and then by Prohibition, but a much bigger threat lay in the application of recording technology on an industrial scale, which was rapidly changing how music was produced, heard, and sold. Radio broadcasting of musical performances had already reduced the number of job opportunities for live performers, and, very soon, the canned music of talking pictures put thousands of movie theater accompanists out of work. The forward march of cultural industrialization had begun, and the musicians, actors, singers, dancers and others who had crisscrossed the postbellum landscape in hundreds of small performing companies now faced an uncertain future in the age of Vitaphone and Movietone. Traditional commercial forms of theater, vaudeville, and the circus would take a beating, and their larger, and hence lucrative, audiences would be poached away by the millions.

Jobs for artists of all categories did not decline, however, at least not until the meltdown of the Great Depression. Nonetheless, the conditions of artistic expression would be decisively altered by industrialization in the 1910s and 1920s. Practitioners of the high culture genres, cut off from a popular consumer base and catering more and more to an educated and well-heeled cognoscenti, would eventually drift into the quarantine zone of the nonprofit sector. There, a full-blown cult of artistic license would flourish, sponsored, in the postwar years, by a Cold War policy establishment that lavishly promoted the superior civic liberties of the West. The nonprofit enclave proved an ideal hothouse for the psychopathology of the late Romantic artist, living hand to mouth and visibly chafing at the comforts, however scant and short-lived, provided by a medley of corporate, government, and bourgeois patrons. By contrast, in the commercial sectors of film, radio, advertising, TV, journalism, and recording, arts workers, beginning in the early 1930s, would accept a more stable and increasingly union wage in exchange for the virtual surrender of artistic autonomy.

The great divide between the high arts and popular culture has, of course, been discussed to death (including by this author) as a measure of changes in the aesthetic life and mass social organization of modern times. The corresponding change in the nature of cultural labor has received much less attention. Even within the literature that could be grouped together under the heading of cultural policy, the lion's share is given over to the "funding problem" of the arts, such as changes in the sources and traditions of patronage and institutional money supply. By contrast, there is relatively little focus on the "labor problem" of the arts.⁷ Among the exceptions to this rule are two quite different, but not untypical, approaches to this topic of cultural labor—the cultural discount and the cost disease.

The Cultural Discount

In the first approach, the cultural labor problem figures primarily as the challenge of maintaining a steady supply of workers willing to discount the price of their labor for love of their craft. This might be characterized as a version of “how difficult it is to find good help these days.” The most incisive version of this thesis can be found in San Francisco Foundation executive William Kreidler’s useful account of the rise and decline of the non-profit arts foundation. Central to Kreidler’s analysis is the principle of the cultural discount, by which artists and other arts workers accept non-monetary rewards—the gratification of producing art—as compensation for their work, thereby discounting the cash price of their labor.⁸

Kreidler points out that, in the nineteenth century, it was the model of individual proprietorship that characterized most theaters, orchestras, opera companies, performing arts impresarios, and many museums, both high and low (though the separation between elite and popular, as Lawrence Levine and others have shown, was much less distinct at that time).⁹ While these for-profit proprietorships had to meet the test of the marketplace to survive, they were still heavily subsidized and sustained by the willingness of cultural workers to accept deeply discounted compensation for their labor. Indeed, it is fair to say that the largest subsidy to the arts has always come from workers themselves. To this day, all such workers, even those employed on market-driven contracts, tend to earn compensation well below that commensurate with their skills and levels of educational attainment. The cruel indifference of the marketplace does not seem to deter the chronically discounted. Indeed, and largely because of artists’ traditions of sacrifice, it often appears to spur them on in ways that would be regarded as self-destructive in any other economic sector.

Kreidler observes that, lately, arts organizations have begun to worry about the depletion of this discount labor supply. Today’s youth, he suggests, are less attracted to the ethos of public service or service to the arts that equates to personal sacrifice, an ethos that was more appealing to relatively affluent, white baby boomers in the post-Kennedy period at the height of nonprofit funding of the arts. As the pipeline of nonprofit funding has sharply reduced its flow, and as leisure time has declined radically for most people in the United States in the last two decades, the arts economy faces an uncertain future in which the older proprietary models have all been subsumed by the commercial culture industries, and in which its traditional dependence on volunteer, discounted labor can no longer be taken for granted. Subtle improvements in the money supply, he concludes, are not likely to offset the long-term impact of labor attrition.

Since Kreidler assumes that the status and levels of comparative compensation enjoyed by artists have not changed significantly since the entrepreneurial heyday of the nineteenth-century arts proprietor, the root of the current arts crisis must therefore lie in the “selfish gene” pool of the boomer parent. Although he does not identify the problem in quite this candid way, it is not unfair to see his conclusion as akin to parental indictments of Gen X apathy. The labor crisis of the arts can thus be laid at the door of youngsters who will not commit to an ideal higher than their own self-absorbed, material interests. Presumably the moral calling of the arts is not well served by a generation distinguished by its cultivation of types like the world-class slacker or the Internet IPO highflyer. If we flesh out this line of argument, we can almost hear the grouchy tones of the parental scold, chiding the listless offspring with mawkish tales about his own hardships of yore, nobly borne in cold-water apartments and fixtureless lofts. Reasoning that appeals to the moral fiber of generational temperament may be consoling, especially to those above the boomer waterline, but it will not provide a cogent assessment of the state of cultural labor. Not when the percentage of employees identified as artists, in national labor statistics, is higher than ever. Not when the principle of the cultural discount is more and more utilized on a semiindustrial scale in sectors of the knowledge industries.

The Cost Disease

A second kind of explanation of the labor crisis, with proven historical impact on arts funding, has been advanced by arts economists. Professionally challenged by evidence of productive activity that does not observe the all-powerful laws of market supply and demand, the liberal economist is drawn to offer a persuasive structural explanation for the “income gap” between the arts and other professions. One influential example was offered by William Baumol in a 1966 study of the performing arts coauthored with fellow Princeton economist William Bowen. With the help of their faculty spouses, who did much of the empirical research, Baumol and Bowen set out to reveal how and why the performing arts have failed to keep up with the impressive productivity gains, measured in outputs per man hour, that have been recorded by other sectors of American industry in the course of the century. For their purposes, they propose to assess the labor cost per unit of the arts as if the arts functioned like any other service-sector industry: “It is helpful to treat the arts, not as an intangible manifestation of the human spirit, but as a productive activity which provides services to the community: one which, in this respect,

does not differ from the manufacture of electricity or the supply of transportation or house-cleaning services.”¹⁰ In this respect, of course, Baumol and Bowen find that the performing arts do not behave at all like other sectors of the service economy, primarily because they cannot, by their nature, exploit the productivity gains that come with advances in technology. In terms of its technological conditions of production, a contemporary performance of *Macbeth* is not substantially different from its Elizabethan equivalent. “It will be seen,” Baumol and Bowen continue, “that the tendency for costs to rise and for prices to lag behind is neither a matter of bad luck nor mismanagement. Rather, it is an inescapable result of the technology of live performance, which will continue to contribute to the widening of the income gaps of the performing organizations.”

While the costs of performing will continue to rise without an increase in productivity, Baumol and Bowen conclude, more auspiciously, that productivity in other sectors of economy will provide workers with more leisure time to consume and participate in the arts, and thereby alleviate some of the economic pressure. This cheerful rider, so indicative of the mid-1960s American climate of chipper expectations, would have a much more consequential echo in Bowen’s infamous report on a different service profession, twenty-three years later. His 1989 study of graduate education forecast widespread tenure-track job openings in the professoriat by the middle of the 1990s and may have bootlessly lured thousands into doctoral programs with its assurances of a buoyant future in college teaching.¹¹

Baumol and Bowen’s 1966 forecast foundered almost as quickly as the one offered by Bowen in 1989. A decline in the leisure time available to the general U.S. workforce set in with a vengeance in the early 1970s and has not been stemmed, not even by the finance capital bonanza of the 1990s bull market, which seems to have triggered even higher levels of performance anxiety. Overwork, as opposed to joblessness, is now the most chronic feature of the labor landscape. Nonetheless, the results of the 1966 study helped to fuel the clamor for increased state funding for the arts, revived that same year, after a hiatus of almost three decades, with the creation of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). Baumol’s “cost disease” model, as it came to be known (the cost disease condemns the cost per live performance to rise at a rate persistently faster than that of a typically manufactured good), provided empirical support for state intervention in the arts, and subsequently became a staple principle of welfare economics.

But his cost disease does not apply solely to the arts. It is shared, he points out, by other “stagnant sectors” like health and education, whose capacity to provide services is impaired by increasing relative costs.¹²

Handicapped from the outset by the cost disease, the arts, in Baumol's opinion, can either join the productive sector—by emulating the culture industries in their adaptation of advanced technologies—or hew more and more to the model of social services, like health or education, or national defense for that matter, which produce a subsidized public good under the heavy hand of bureaucratic supervision.

In some respects, both of these outcomes have come to pass. The institutional divide between the high and low arts has continued to blur, and more and more live performance has come to serve a merely promotional function for cultural product available to remote consumers in some other technologically mediated format. So, too, as George Yúdice has analyzed, the new profile of the artist as a social-service worker is coming to supplant the autonomous avant-garde innovator as a fundable type, increasingly sponsored through local arts agencies. The all-purpose artist-citizen, whose work can help to preserve rural and inner-city communities at risk and stimulate efforts to revive their economies, is increasingly viewed as a means to create jobs through cultural tourism, to promote urban renewal through the competitive siting of museums and arts centers, to save teenagers from substance abuse, or generally to enhance public education through an infusion of communicative skills.¹³

New Model Workers

In the steady withdrawal of federal support for the arts, Yúdice sees a new phase of governmentality. Released from its lingering Cold War obligations, the state is now forging and brokering model partnerships within civil society, between government, corporations, and nonprofit foundations and groups. Akin in some ways to the liberalization of health and education services, this new profile for the arts as the poster child for civic activity extends not just to new kinds of application—"from youth programs and crime prevention to job training and race relations," in the words of "American Canvas," a recent (1997) NEA report by Gary Larson. It also includes the new kinds of sponsors or "partners that arts organizations have taken on in recent years, with school districts, parks and recreation departments, convention and visitor bureaus, chambers of commerce, and a host of social welfare agencies all serving to highlight the utilitarian aspects of the arts in contemporary society."¹⁴ Everyone is potentially a partner in this newly fluid civic sphere where private and public can no longer clearly be distinguished. One of the political outcomes that Yúdice discerns is the soft management of dissent—the traditionally adversarial artist is accommodated through the offering, and vol-

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untary embrace of, partner status. Under this arrangement, time-honored traditions like *épater la bourgeoisie* and bash-the-bureaucrat will be retired, since this new profile does not *require* artists to bite the hand that feeds them as proof of their “free” will in a liberal society.

If this profile does indeed herald a new kind of arrangement of public authority that triangulates state, corporate, and nonprofit sectors, the serviceability of the artist’s flexible labor is even more indicative of the moment. Since flexible specialization was introduced as a leading industrial principle, the number of artists employed in the general labor force (defined in decennial Census data and annual Bureau of Labor Statistics reports as eleven occupations: artists who work with their hands, authors, actors and directors, designers, dancers, architects, photographers, arts teachers, musicians/composers, etc.) has swelled from year to year. According to the NEA’s annual summaries of BLS tabulations, this number more than doubled from 1970 to 1990, showing an 81 percent increase in the course of the 1970s (while artists’ real earnings declined by 37 percent), a 54 percent increase in the 1980s, a slight decline in the depression of the early 1990s, and a renewal of growth ever since, reaching a peak of 2 million in 1998. In 1997, artists were enjoying a growth rate in employment (at 2.7 percent) that far outstrips the general workforce (1.3 percent) and even that of other professional specialists (2.4 percent).¹⁵

These are impressive numbers, but they do not tell a simple story. To figure in the BLS survey, “one must be working during the survey week and have described that job/work as one of eleven artist occupations.” Respondents are asked to describe the job at which “they worked the most number of hours in the survey week.” Artists working more hours in other jobs outside the arts are classified as employed in those other occupations. By 1998, these amounted to an additional 330,000, for a total of 2,280,000 artists employed in the workforce.¹⁶ Randy Martin points out that these requirements gloss over the verifiable existence of full-time jobs within that occupational sector: “One works in an occupation, a sector, but has the flexibility to remain unattached. The artist can secure an identity for a day’s wage, but the rest of the week remains unsecuritized.”¹⁷ Because of the high degree of self-employment, and because they are most likely to have other jobs to support a creative trade that habitually employs them for only a portion of a workweek, employment and earnings data on cultural workers have always been unreliable. Even in the most highly unionized entertainment guilds, where the majority of members cannot find work on any given day, the dominant employment model is casual employment on a project-by-project basis. Loyalty is to the guild or craft or union, rather than to a single employer.¹⁸

There is clearly more going on here than the sleight-of-hand interpretation of statistics to paint a rosy picture of job creation in the arts. Whether or not we can verify a proliferation of new jobs, it is clear that the “mentality” of artists’ work is more and more in demand. In respect both to their function and the use of this work mentality, it looks as if artists are steadily being relocated from their traditional position at the social margins of the productive economy and recruited into roles closer to the economic centers of production. Indeed, the traditional profile of the artist as unattached and adaptable to circumstance is surely now coming into its own as the ideal definition of the postindustrial knowledge worker: comfortable in an ever-changing environment that demands creative shifts in communication with different kinds of clients and partners; attitudinally geared toward production that requires long, and often unsocial, hours; and accustomed, in the sundry exercise of their mental labor, to a contingent, rather than a fixed, routine of self-application.

The example of employment patterns in the New Media industries of New York City is a case in point. The backbone of the Silicon Alley workforce in the pioneer start-up phase of this new urban industry was staffed by employees—“creative content-providers,” or digital manipulators in Web site and software development—who had been trained primarily as artists. In the entirely nonunionized Webshop workplaces, over half of the jobs are filled by contract employees or perma-temps, with no employer-supported health care. Deeply caffeinated eighty-five-hour workweeks without overtime pay are a way of life for Webshop workers on flexible contracts, who invest a massive share of “sweat equity” in the mostly futile hope that their stock options will pay off. The rate of growth for part-time employment far exceeds that for full-time job creation, and the average 1997 full-time salary (at \$37,000) is well below the equivalent in old media industries, like advertising (at \$71,000) and television broadcasting (at \$86,000).¹⁹ Evolving patterns of subcontracting in Silicon Alley are not so far removed from those that created offshore back offices for data processing in the Caribbean, Ireland, and Bangalore, or semiconductor factories in countries that also host the worst sweatshops in the global garment industry.

For the most part, the Webshops physically occupy spaces filled by manufacturing sweatshops a century ago. Artists who took over these manufacturing lofts beginning in the 1950s enjoyed wide-open floors where work space doubled as living space. This live/work ethos was embraced, to some degree, by the upscale cultural elites who later consolidated “loft living” as a real estate attraction, and it has been extended now into the funky milieu of the Webshops, where work looks almost exactly like play. All in all, the New Media workplace is a prescient indi-

cator of the near future of labor, which combines mental skills with new technologies in alternative environments. Customized workplaces where the lines between labor and leisure have dissolved; horizontal networking among heroic teams of self-directed workers; the proto-hipster appeal of bohemian dress codes, personal growth, and nonhierarchical surroundings; the vague promise of bounteous rewards from stock options; and employees so complicit with the culture of overwork and burnout that they have developed their own insider brand of sick humor about being “net slaves,” that is, it’s actually cool to be exploited so badly. Industrial capitalists used to dream about such a workforce, but their managerial techniques were too rigid to foster it. These days, the new-wave management wing of the New Economy worships exactly this kind of decentralized environment, which “empowers” workers, banishes bureaucratic constraints on their creativity, and delivers meaningful and nonalienated labor for a grateful and independently minded workforce.

Labor history is full of vicious little time warps, where archaic or long foresworn practices and conceptions of work are reinvented in a fresh context to suit some new economic arrangement. The “sweating” system of farming out work to competing contractors in the nineteenth-century garment industry was once considered an outdated exception to the rule of the integrated factory system. Disdained as a preindustrial relic by the apostles of scientific management, this form of subcontracting is now a basic principle of almost every sector of the postindustrial economy and has emerged as the number one weapon in capital’s arsenal of labor cost-cutting and union-busting. Where once the runaway shops were in New Jersey, now they are in Haiti, China, and Vietnam. So, too, the ethos of the autonomous artist, once so fiercely removed from industry’s dark satanic mills and from the soiled hand of commerce, has been recouped and revamped as a convenient, even alluring, *esprit de corps* for contingent work in today’s decentralized knowledge factories. Indeed, the “voluntary poverty” of the *déclassé* bohemian artist—an ex-bourgeois descendant, more often than not, of the self-exiled Romantic poet—may turn out to be an inadvertent forerunner of the discounted labor of the new industrial landscape.

How does the legacy of these nineteenth-century traditions enter into the analyses of the cultural economists? In their 1966 study, Baumol and Bowen have little to say about the impact of Romantic artist mythology, except to note that the parlous condition of artist compensation “seems only to elicit apathy from a public whose responses have been dulled by the stereotyped and somewhat romantic notion of the engarreted and starving artist.”²⁰ In considering arguments against government support of the arts, they also refer to the

antediluvian manifestation that poverty is good for the arts and stimulates creativity. “We want to develop a hungry theater” said one witness at the [1962] House Hearings on economic conditions in the performing arts, who went on to assert that only a hungry man feels compelled to say “what’s in him.”²¹

Antediluvian this may well be, yet popular wisdom is chockablock with gimcrack rationales for paying people less than they deserve. Many are distorted hand-me-down versions of formerly principled positions about the worth of labor and the dignity of expression. Others are more candid judgments about the expendability of workers. When they circulate as common sense, they do have some real impact on net income levels, but not in a way that the empirical economist can safely measure. These nuggets of ideology are often at their most antediluvian when viewed from the perspective of the rational science of neoclassical economics, which cannot break down their influence on labor markets into hard numbers. Who could compute the impact of popular prejudices about race and gender on the kind of heavily segmented work that women or immigrants are expected to take on, at depressed wage levels? Yet market supply and demand cannot explain alone those features of labor segmentation that consign women and immigrants to specialized locations in the secondary labor market.

Artists Cannot Afford to Be Rewarded Well?

It may be worth taking the time, briefly, to review some of the history of what Baumol and Bowen refer to as the “antediluvian manifestation” of the starving artist. Ever since the name of the artist was attached to art works, patrons have been extracting prestige and profit from their purchase of some association with the labor of art. In part to maintain and inflate this prestige, artistic labor was elevated to a rank above and beyond the mere workmanship of craft and trade. It was the royal, papal, and noble patrons of the Renaissance who, for their own gain, invented the concept of the artist-genius in emulation of the alchemist who, through his craft, might turn the dross of mere custom into the gold of lavish repute. Traces of this precapitalist prestige survive in those successive phases of patronage characterized by the bourgeois public, the mass market, and the state subsidy (entire nation states claim status on the global landscape on the basis of the great artists they have produced). As for the work of art itself, Marx’s distinction between the value of labor and labor power—the value added to a product, in this case, primarily the

artist's name—is potentially colossal. The autonomous artist, who emerges in the nineteenth century as a solo entrepreneur working for a largely anonymous public audience, can benefit, in principle, from the surplus value that the name adds to his or her labor. But the name's value tends to increase with the formal estrangement of the artistic soul from the bargaining and haggling of the marketplace. Any taint of mercenary involvement with market supply and demand can diminish the worth of that name.

For the most part, then, this surplus value accrues in reality to the publisher, dealer, promoter, producer, or owner-manager. To say the least, it is in their pecuniary interest to endorse their clients' remove from matters of commerce. The personal agent emerges as the artist's best shot at recouping some of this value. When literary agents first sought to strengthen writers' bargaining power in the literary marketplace of the late nineteenth century, publishers complained that this "philistine" intervention disrupted the sacred bond between writer and publisher.²² Yet these agents were realizing their clients' labor power in much the same way as trade unionists of the time. (In bargaining for hours and wages, the unionists were also accused of "intruding" on the benevolent capitalist's relationship with his workers.) Did the result amount, as publishers predicted, to any cheapening or commercialization of culture? To some degree, yes, but nowhere nearly as much as the behavior of publishers themselves, already covetous of the popular market, and well primed to pattern the book trade in the mold of the mass media industries that would dominate the twentieth century.

The noble ethos of the unattached artist was conceived in the struggle to break free from aristocratic patronage and was clearly compromised by the simultaneous emergence of a mass commercial audience from the womb of the bourgeois public. Most fatefully, from the perspective of the artist wage, this ethos was soaked in the full torrent of Romantic thought about the separation of art and culture from the commodity production of industrialization. As the industrial division of labor everywhere sought to convert artisans into machine operatives, artists recoiled from being treated like any other trade producer. At the very least, the artist would be an independent skilled worker producing a marginal commodity of taste, but the higher calling of the Romantic imagination demanded something more. The artist was called on to represent, if not wholly embody, those imaginative qualities, skills, and virtues that industrial civilization was systematically destroying.

Ironically, then, the artistic sensibility that was so opposed to utility could not afford to be directly rewarded by trade, yet the commodity value of the artwork rose in direct relation to the artist's remoteness from

trade. In time, the very highest value could be attached to the work of those—Van Gogh is the quintessential example—who were most detached, reclusive, ignored, or pauperized by bourgeois society. To some degree, this value could appreciate in inverse proportion to the depression of their labor value while alive. As the moving legacy of Romantic ideas collided and meshed with the evolving arts economy, a curious, and perhaps unique, condition of labor emerged. *The artist cannot afford to be rewarded well.* High-caliber compensation proves fatal to the peer appraisal of an artist's achievement; pecuniary neglect, by that same token, translates into cultural credit.

With the subsequent development of urban, bohemian quarters in low-income districts, this formula would have a geographical basis in the rent economy of the industrializing city and would endure several decades of suburban flight and urban renewal until the waves of gentrification finally washed over its center-city habitat. The special condition of artistic labor, however, persists in all sorts of vestigial ways. Aside from its increasing use as a rationale for flexible labor in the new postindustrial workplace, in its traditional form it may well serve a general function in a capitalist society as an alleviator of liberal guilt for living in an exchange economy that puts a market price on everything. This social sanctioning of discounted arts labor is quite distinct from the pro bono work built into the pricing system of other, more highly paid professions like the law. Alpha professionals, like lawyers, occasionally work for free because they can afford to do so, or because their complicity with structural injustice would otherwise be too obtrusive. This is no less the case for the highest paid arts workers in the commercial sector, like pop musicians, whose continued popularity often depends on high profile appearances at benefit concerts where their fees are seen to be waived for a higher cause. But artists in general are expected, and are therefore inclined, to put in time gratis for love of their art in contexts that would require overtime pay for most other workers.

To compound matters, there persists an ingrained prejudice on the Left against being well paid occupationally, whether in the arts or in the academy. According to this reasoning, an underpaid intelligentsia can identify more readily with those living in low-wage conditions or real poverty. Material self-denial and voluntary poverty are the monkish markers of conscience and left-wing integrity in a reward economy. Compassion and commitment may well flow from this posture, but they are hardly dependent on it. Ultimately, there is something quite patronizing about this belief, redolent, as it is, of middle-class fantasies about the lives and aspirations of working people. This ascetic credo is quite at odds, for example, with the postscarcity thrust of ameliorative laborism, typified by

Wobbly chieftain Big Bill Haywood's pronouncement (when asked about the fat cigars he smoked) that "nothing's too good for the proletariat."

For a modern version of Haywood's bravura, consider the priority placed on "getting paid in full," which pervades so much of the culture of hip hop and which is so distasteful to the white rock bohemian critic or indie musician. The ready pursuit of wealth through fame, celebrated so earthily by rappers, is oftentimes infused with the claim for reparations for the music industry's theft of decades of black labor, copyrights, and profits, at the same time as it is shaped by the media world's crass worship of materialism. The tenacious career of hip hop (whose top billers tend to be commercial champions for only a short period of time before they fall to fresh contenders) demonstrates that the choice of preserving one's artistic integrity was never an option equal to "selling out," and was only really adopted as a litmus test of integrity by members of the white rock counterculture who elevated it to an unlikely criterion of faith for most working musicians, let alone African American ones. Deprived, since the "discovery" of the Delta bluesmen, of a supply of domestic primitives, well-meaning liberal rockists (Paul Simon, Sting, David Byrne, Ry Cooder) have patronized Third World musicians hitherto remote from any direct contact with the dollar economy. The Buena Vista Social Club of Cuba's aging, "forgotten" legends is the most recent, and perhaps the best, example of this search for purity of performance unsullied by high exchange rates.

Indeed, the elevation of the rock performer of the 1960s and 1970s saw perhaps the most vibrant revival, in recent times, of the persona of the Romantic poet-artist, untouched by the rule of lucre and ostensibly heedless to market demands. When rockists got around to challenging their long-term servitude to record company contracts and to exploitative managers, they stood to lose cultural credit among fans for negotiating so visibly and brazenly with the industry suits. By contrast, the hip hop "rebel without a pause" of the 1980s, while imbued with multiple Romantic traits, was fully expected to contest the terms under which his music and work were contracted. Public Enemy, among the most visible then, have recently seized the new Internet technology of MP3 (digital compression of audio) in a bid by their self-owned company to outfox the majors by bypassing traditional distribution routes. Gangsta rappers, recruited into the bicoastal wars between the black-owned Death Row and Bad Boy recording empires, became larger-than-life figments of the casino capitalist imagination—burlesque cartoons of the neighborhood bully or player who got lucky—and in so doing called attention to the sheer mercantile substance of their raunchy product. A performer like "Prince," with primarily rockist (albeit glam rock/funk) credentials, confused the genre dis-

tinctions altogether when he changed his name (and inscribed “Slave” on his face) to get out of his Warner Brothers contract.

While the pedigree and tenor of the rock troubadours evolved out of folk singer-songwriter traditions that had a heyday in the 1930s, the trappings were borrowed as much from déclassé bohemian velvet as from populist sharecropper denim redolent of the Great Depression. One aims at the cosmopolitan stance as fiercely as the other is determined to be parochial. The former (David Bowie, Jimi Hendrix, Patti Smith, Jim Morrison) glorifies personal deliverance from the social constraints of class consciousness and morality. The latter (Bob Dylan, Bob Marley, Tracy Chapman, Bruce Springsteen) gives voice to generic anthems that register the shared yearnings of the multitude. Virtuoso expression vies with genre interpretation. But these are not simply choices among modes of performance, although they have become very effective commercial marketing profiles. They are also profiles of labor, symbolizing the kind of work that artists are expected, or imagined, to do in society, and so they borrow accordingly from history’s wardrobe. For another related example, consider the traditional garb of the Anglo-American intelligentsia, which conveys its studied distance from the worldly uniforms of commerce. The long-suffering tweed jacket of the academic and the high-brow writer evolves directly from the attire of the English country gentleman who does not dirty his hands with city trade. While many alternative forms of sartorial affiliation have flourished in recent years, university intellectuals will generally not wear business suits unless they hold higher administrative positions, and, when they are not aping faded gentility, they will opt, like most other arts professionals, for downwardly mobile apparel.

In the United States, the point of origin for many of the new modes of mental labor remains the New Deal, and the short-lived, but iconoclastic, series of federal programs that directly employed jobless artists and writers. What was the consequence, if any, of the formerly outlandish idea that artists would be targeted by poor relief programs in much the same way as unemployed welders and construction workers?

The Service Ideal

By the mid-1930s, the Depression landscape of breadlines, soup kitchens, and shantytowns had flattened out the élan of bohemia and closed off patronage routes and avenues of income. The proverbial “starving artist” was suddenly no different from the man in the street, struggling to survive. Their social and economic predicament were one and the same. Both needed a living wage. Although its programs barely survived through

the end of the decade, Project Number One of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), begun in 1935, organized relief for tens of thousands of artists, writers, actors, and musicians, and parlayed a legacy of semipublic support into the nonprofit infrastructure of foundations, museums, and universities into the years following the war. While its primary aim was simply to put food on the table, this New Deal for the arts was conceived in the ferment of intellectuals' allegiance to the cause of organized labor. The opportunity it offered to promote radical causes inevitably stirred up a hornet's nest among grandstanding members of Congress who oversaw the demise of the programs in a spasm of premature McCarthyism, beginning with The House Un-American Activities Committee's liquidation of the Federal Theater Project in 1939. Unlike the *proletkult* aesthetic adopted by artists and writers who leaned toward Comintern policy, there was no single aesthetic unity to the work produced in the programs. In many respects, then, they were a social-democratic alternative to the bureaucratic cultural policies administered under state Communism and promoted overseas by the Comintern. Insofar as they may have resulted in partial accommodation with the state, they were a relatively inexpensive way of appeasing the political opposition of influential voices.

For some critics, especially those, like Harold Rosenberg, in the *Partisan Review* circle, the WPA programs ruinously emptied out the bohemian ideal, drawing artists in from the more radical margins of society and placing them on a domesticated path toward professionalization.²³ This first step in the bureaucratizing of the arts threatened to compromise the ideal of the autonomous artist. Even worse, the academic ghetto lay ahead. For those, like Rosenberg, who hewed fiercely to the credo of the unattached radical, the independent mind would be a fatal casualty of the transition from the WPA's weekly government wage to the state college's tenure-track salary.

But it was the inexorable rise of the culture industries that had a much greater impact on the profile of cultural labor, while posing an equally grave threat to the value system of key intellectuals like Rosenberg, Irving Howe, Clement Greenberg, and Dwight McDonald. Michael Denning argues that the coalescence of Popular Front activities within the heart of the commercial culture industries gave rise to something new and significant—the “emergence of modern mental labor.”²⁴ With highly successful unionization drives in radio, film, recording, and journalism, performers, writers, and artists could not help but further their sense of common cause with workers organized, after the CIO model, in the great industrial unions of the day. Reinforcing that common cause was a spate of cultural production influenced by Popular Front values and politics.

One result of this arts unionism, Denning observes, is that the classic division between mental and manual labor began to erode decisively. Older ideas about artistic and intellectual work began to dissolve in the face of the new white-collar cultural trades, while a congeries of new corporate forces came to the fore, competing and collaborating at the same time with state agencies to manage mental production, distribution, and consumption on a mass scale. C. Wright Mills would later describe this as the “cultural apparatus,” a vast semiorganized network of institutions, where

arts, science, and learning, entertainment, malarkey, and information are distributed and produced. It contains an elaborate set of institutions; of schools and theaters, newspapers and census bureaus, studios, laboratories, museums, little magazines, radio networks. It contains truly fabulous agencies of exact information and of trivial distraction, exciting objects, lazy escapes, strident advice.

Mills saw this “cultural apparatus” as a direct result of the “overlap between culture and authority,” and its *raison d’être* depended on the use of “cultural workmen for the legitimation of power.”²⁵

Unlike those in the *Partisan Review* circle, Mills had little nostalgia for the demise of the bohemian ideal of the unattached artist, nor did he share their snuffy contempt for the commercial products of mass and middlebrow culture, but he more or less shared their views about the use of commercial culture to legitimate power. For all the differences between the major schools of leftist commentary about commercial popular culture—whether the Frankfurt school, the New York Intellectuals, or other tendencies represented by Gramsci, Mills, the New Left, and the Birmingham school—their critiques all rested upon a common view of the culture industries as instruments of mass consent and/or social control.

What is striking about Denning’s shift of emphasis is that he reminds us that the rise of this new cultural apparatus was *also an opportunity for labor*. Culture, in its new industrial context, was now a product of mass labor, and the politics of labor to which it gave birth bore many similarities to the conditions of industrial unionism. Just as important, however, the workers whose labor was involved—screenwriters, actors, musicians—could exert a direct influence on the shape and content of the product. (Teachers, journalists, and healthcare workers would follow in this mold.) Cultural workers could seek to politicize the product of their labor in a way that autoworkers could not. This was something relatively new in the annals of labor. As a result, the history of commercial culture is one of perpetual compromise, concession, truce, and arbitration both on the side

of labor bargaining and also in the business of content bargaining. The reputation of “liberal Hollywood” (not entirely a right-wing invention) stems from both angles of this new politics of labor. In Baumol’s analysis of the arts economy, he cites the high level of unionization as an obstacle to efficiency in a sector where independent craft functions are “carefully protected” by each union local. On the other side, we are all too well aware of the ceaseless efforts of many cultural workers to give their artistic product a liberal or progressive slant in the face of systemic pressure to reinforce the capitalist value system.

Intellectuals in the Cold War period devoted a good deal of time to declaiming on the stultifying impact of “mass culture.” For critics who had been weaned on workers’ causes in the 1930s, it is astonishing how little attention they paid to labor’s involvement in the culture industries. Virtually none saw this development as a fit topic for extended commentary. Even C. L. R. James, who keenly followed the record and progress of labor, and who, in *American Civilization*, saw the American entertainment industry as part of the most advanced industrial state of popular civilization, did not necessarily see the culture industry’s workplaces as “labor’s workplaces.” The closest he came was in drawing an analogy between the bargaining process of capital and labor and the process of negotiation hashed out between the industry’s owners and the mass audiences of popular culture over the politics of content. Uncomfortable with the view of the Frankfurt and *Partisan Review* critics that moguls and bankers frankly use popular culture’s content to affirm capitalist values, James believed the bosses would not dare to impose their political views. Indeed, part of their compact with audiences is the unwritten agreement not to do so.

The general public accepts, or to be more precise, appears to accept the general political ideas, standards, social ethics, etc. of the society which is the natural framework of the films as they are produced today. Whenever possible a piece of direct propaganda is injected, but the C.I.O., the great strikes, capital and labor, war and peace, these are left out by mutual understanding, a sort of armed neutrality. If those who control films dared in ordinary times, to give their view of these problems in films, for instance, they would empty the movie houses. The large masses of the people would not stand for any employer view of unions in films. In totalitarian states, the state does exactly the opposite. It uses the film, the popular film, to the limit. In fact the film is merely an arm of the government.²⁶

Echoing the Cold War climate that was coming into being in 1950, James depicts the state of affairs as a “sort of armed neutrality.” The accord he describes in film is not unlike the recent postwar compact between capital

and labor. In return for capital's recognition of basic bargaining rights, labor, by 1950, has accepted the general framework of capitalist society.

The Cold War added a new, international dimension to the uneasy truce to which James was alluding. For almost forty years, the cultural policy that accompanied Cold War "armed neutrality" was tied to a massive exercise in state propaganda (some of it covert). For the purpose of this policy, artists were no longer federal workers, they were now ambassadors of freedom, exported on cultural exchange programs by the United States Information Agency (USIA) to put the best face on liberal, capitalist values. In contrast to the proletarianization of the artist in the WPA of the 1930s, the credo of the autonomous artist was revived by the Cold War. This time around, the autonomy in question was not from trade, as in the Romantic version, but from the state censorship more prevalent in the socialist states. As for cultural workers in the commercial industries, they could be seen to belong to "free" trade unions at least, after the Communist presence in the labor movement had been purged. All of this was presented as a counterpoint to the unfree mental labor of the socialist bloc and its Third World client states.

But by far the most extensive development on this front, and of the welfare state in general, was the massive expansion of the national higher education system in this period. The state thereby bought itself a dependable research arm, especially through defense-related funding in the sciences: corporations were able to have basic research funded and future employees trained at public expense; and the "herd of independent minds," as Rosenberg once described the intelligentsia, was brought under the purview of academic deans and other responsible institutional shepherds. Again, these developments dealt the United States immense advantages in the public relations game of the Cold War. However expedient to the corporate liberal state, these advantages were won in the name of academic freedom and the democratic extension of education to the lower middle class and portions of the working class.

When the American labor market became flexible in the 1980s, and union organizing eroded as a fundamental right, blue-collar unions took a direct hit, but white-collar and professional organizing was still on the rise. The new knowledge industries, either comprising the higher education sector or built around a university research complex, provided a natural union base for salaried employees with less and less control over their own workplace. In the 1990s, the corporatization of higher education set in for real, and the post-Fordist principles of outsourcing, downsizing, deskilling, reengineering, and flexible, temporary contracting began to take a heavy toll on institutions nominally built on tenure, academic freedom, and faculty governance. The tenure-track appointment, hitherto a

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staple contract in the profession, rapidly became a privileged exception to the rule. Professional academics, long accustomed to regarding their workplace as a nonworldly realm, beholden to different rules and standards from those observed in more “secular” employment sectors, had a rude awakening. In no time at all, it seemed, higher education had become one of the more advanced forms, among the professions, of the adjunct contract workplace, where a large percentage of its part-time labor force were soon struggling to earn any kind of living wage.

A Volunteer Low-Wage Army?

The rapidity with which the low-wage revolution swept through higher education was clearly hastened along by conditions amenable to discounting mental labor. For one thing, the “willingness” of scholars (whether as graduate students or postdoctoral employees) to accept a discounted wage out of “love for their subject” has helped not only to sustain the cheap labor supply but also to magnify its strength and volume. Like artists and performers, academics are inclined by training to sacrifice earnings for the opportunity to exercise their craft. While other traditional professional industries, like law or medicine, depend to some degree on intern labor, none rely economically on the self-sacrifice of their accredited members to anything like the same degree.

Employers have long relied on maintaining a reserve army of unemployed to keep wages down in any labor market. Higher education is now in this business with a vengeance. In addition—and this is the significant element—its managers increasingly draw on a volunteer low-wage army. By this I do not mean to suggest that adjunct and part-timer educators eagerly invite their underpayment and lack of benefits or job security. Nor are they inactive in protesting and organizing for their interests. Like the musicians at the New School, they are beginning to form bargaining units and win contracts, though a contingent workforce is notoriously difficult to organize. Rather, I choose the phrase to describe the natural outcome of a training in the habit of embracing nonmonetary rewards—mental or creative gratification—as compensation for work. As a result, low compensation for a high workload becomes a rationalized feature of the job. In the most perverse extension of this logic, underpayment can even be regarded as proof of the worth of the academic vocation—the ultimate measure of the selfless and disinterested pursuit of knowledge.

No doubt, one of the contributing elements here is a vestige of the amateur ideal of the scholar (even the scholar-gypsy, if you want to talk about flexibility *avant la lettre*). Indeed, one of the “privileges” enjoyed by

academic scholars was the right to pursue their work in full ignorance of its economic underpinnings. According to this custom, money matters were too vulgar and trivial to be understood, let alone handled, by faculty. Such pecuniary concerns befouled the sacred quest for knowledge and truth. Again, this customary feature of the scholar's profile has made it easy for power to shift rapidly to managers and administrators, whose ready grasp of fiscal affairs renders their decisions uncontested by faculty entirely ignorant of budgetary priorities set elsewhere. In addition, the comfort offered by job security in the form of tenure was a recipe for complacency on the part of those who should have resisted the corporate measures much earlier and more vigorously. Submission to the selfless, disinterested devotions of the scholar's calling inevitably led to the sacrifice of younger "apprentices" on the altar of an anachronistic faith.²⁷

In the restructured, corporate environment of the modern American education system, the net result of this amateur ethos has been deprofessionalization, not the revival of Veblen's virtuous ideal of Idle Curiosity with its canons of faculty governance. We have seen a whole generation of scholars form an underclass of independent contractors, offering their skills hither and thither, on one freeway exit after another, often for what adds up to a subminimum wage. In some respect, this peripatetic regimen is germane to the eccentric work schedule of the traditional academic, who commonly observes no clear boundaries between being on and off the job, and for whom there is often little distinction between paid work and free labor. For the professionally active full-timer, this habitual schedule means that she can take on a range of tasks and obligations that will easily fill out a sixty-hour workweek.²⁸ For the part-timer, desperate to retain the prestige of being a college teacher, the identity of being a switched-on, round-the-clock thinker, eager to impart knowledge, and in a position to freely extend her mental labor, feeds into the psychology of casualized work and underpayment. The industrial worker, by comparison, is not beset by such occupational hazards.

Again, what we see is the fabrication of a model "flexible employee" out of the cloth of capricious protocols and habits, a worker whose customary training in the service ideals and irregular routines of mental labor can be roundly exploited by cost-cutting managers. Certain characteristic features of the academic work style, like those of artists, whom I earlier depicted, conform to the demands of a contingent labor profile. Most portentous of all, perhaps, is the elective component of this situation. Again, I do not mean to suggest that any single individual is drawn toward this predicament, nor indeed that they are directly implicated in their own exploitation. I am proposing that labor is being casualized in ways that complement the habits and compulsions of the academic mentality. It is in

this respect that we can speak, objectively, of a volunteer army, whether of unemployed or of contracted low-wage labor. (Is love of one's disciplinary art so remote, in this respect, from the love of country that drives volunteers into the sacrificial arms of military service?)

As part of its ceaseless search for ways to induct workers in their own exploitation, capital, it might be said, may have found the makings of a *self-justifying*, low-wage workforce, at the very heart of the knowledge industries so crucial to its growth and development. It is no small irony that artists and academics, who would have been borderline, even oddball, features of an older labor landscape, are now more like exemplary, even avant-garde, figures, heralding the next plateau of uneven development. Continuing the process by which capital broke its Fordist compact with core manufacturing labor by moving production to the periphery (off-shore, the nonunion South, the service sector), now the once peripheral domains of mental labor are becoming new centers of corporate attention.

Education Entrepreneurs

It's no surprise that the cloistered precincts of the former Ivory Towers have already become a battleground for labor. Too many bullish forces in the corporate sector see higher education as a huge, untapped market for selling goods and services on the basis of the prestigious brand names of universities. At the primary and secondary levels, the spoils of the public school system have long been coveted by "education entrepreneurs," touting the "discipline" of the marketplace over the "inefficiency" of the public realm, and normalizing the rhetoric of corporate management—the public as customer, education as competitive product, learning as efficiency tool. Remember Lamar Alexander's declaration, shortly before becoming secretary of education, that Burger King and Federal Express should set up schools to show how the private sector would run things?²⁹ School-business partnerships opened the door not just to Total Quality Management but to every corporate huckster looking for ways to promote and build brand loyalty in the "K-12 marketplace." Tax-supported school vouchers and union-free charter schools were introduced, respectively, as the fast and the slow track toward privatization. While your local high school hasn't yet been bought out by McDonalds, many educators already use teaching aids and packets of materials, "donated" by companies, that are crammed with industry propaganda designed to instill product awareness among young consumers: lessons about the history of the potato chip, sponsored by the Snack Food Association, or literacy programs that reward students who reach monthly reading goals with Pizza Hut slices.³⁰

In addition to serving as magnets for corporate sponsorship, the economy of scale and the fiscal autonomy enjoyed by institutions of higher education allow them to function like corporations in their own right. On the labor front, they have adopted many of the same tactics of union busting, downsizing, and outsourcing, and they hire the same antiunion law firms (NYU and Yale both retained the notorious Proskauer, Rose, who openly advertise their antiunion advocacy on their Web site, in their respective NLRB hearings about graduate student unions) to represent their interests in the legal arena. In addition, the modern, corporate university is no longer simply a medium for subsidizing or socializing capital's costs of training, research, and development as it was in the Cold War period. It has become a site of capital accumulation in its own right, where the profitability of research and teaching programs and the marketability of learning products is fast coming to the fore as the primary driving force behind academic policy at many institutions. Corporate sponsorship increasingly buys faculty and entire research programs, while the patenting and selling of on-line courses promises a bonanza of low-cost yields.

In many cases, cost-cutting labor policies are also vehicles for establishing ideological control over curricular content. Recent advances in distance learning, for example, are eagerly championed by administrators and state legislators itching to switch their fixed investment in temperamental bodies and impetuous minds over to the sleek machinery of digital pipes with mega bandwidth. When education is viewed as a product to be delivered without risk, then the most compelling corporate vision is that of the wired, tenureless university, where hired hands prepare or administer on-line courses pumped out to a remote, disaggregated student body. Faculty attempts to establish control over on-line instruction are not simply struggles to stave off the automation of jobs; they are also frontline battles in the Culture Wars over the right to determine and influence curriculum.

While the economic payoffs of digitized instruction appear to be self-evident, these technology-assisted developments have less to do with increased efficiency or cost-effectiveness than with control over the workforce and, potentially, the curriculum. The elimination of the social and cultural services ministered by full-time, flesh-and-blood faculty inevitably results in a sharp drop in the quality of education. Any cost-benefit analysis of on-line instruction should have to assess the challenge of delivering a product of comparable quality. Based on this criterion, no one has ever been able to identify clear gains in productivity or cost-effectiveness from the introduction of computers into the workplace. I am referring here to the phenomenon of the productivity paradox, an IT update of the technology trap first identified by business economists in the fledgling years of

automation forty years ago.³¹ “Downstream benefits” have not exactly flowed from the habit of throwing “upstream” money into IT systems, applications, upgrades, management, and maintenance that do not serve the practical needs of businesses or other employee organizations. Promotional hype, technological obsolescence, communication overload, and widespread downtime outages caused by worker sabotage are only some of the factors that inhibit productivity.

Second Thoughts

With or without its virtual arm, how efficient will the newly restructured academic sectors prove to be in servicing the labor markets of industrialized knowledge? Higher education is in a pivotal position in this regard. Not only is it now a massive anchorage for discounted labor among its own workforce, it is also a training site, responsible for reproducing the discounted labor force among the next generation of knowledge workers. Are we contributing involuntarily to the problem when, as educators, we urge students, in pursuing their career goals, to place principles of public interest or collective political agency or creative expression above the pursuit of material security? In a labor environment heavily under the sway of neoliberal business models, is it fair to say that this service ideal invites, if it does not vindicate, the manipulation of inexpensive labor?

Fifteen years ago, this suggestion would have seemed ludicrous. Labor freely offered in the service of some common benefit or mental ideal has always been the informal economic backbone that supports political, cultural, and educational activities in the nonprofit or public interest sectors. Selfless labor of this sort is also a source of great pleasure. The world that we value most—the world that is not in thrall to market dictates—would not exist without this kind of volunteer discounted labor. But what happens when some version of this disinterested labor moves, as I have suggested here, from the social margins to core sectors of capital accumulation? When the opportunity to pursue mentally gratifying work becomes a rationale for discounted labor at heart of the key knowledge industries, is it not time to rethink some of our bedrock pedagogical values? Does the new landscape of mental labor demand more than the usual call for modernizing the politics of labor? What is to be done with the anxiety generated by such questions?

First and foremost, we must remember that the problem lies not in how people operate within an economy, but rather in how that economy is structured, in this case an economy that is still undergoing restructuring

and resegmenting into ever more polarized shapes. Education is surely playing its role in mediating the gulf between the deskilled lower tiers, destined for the secondary labor market, and those upper strata ruled by credentials, tracked into fractions of mental labor. Currently, managers of national and global economies tell us that education is the only passport to economic mobility or security in a knowledge society. And yet people with advanced degrees are working in restaurants and taxicabs, or as Microserf temps, and most service jobs in the secondary labor market (with no prospect of advancement) require little more than basic literacy accompanied by a modest facility in pleasing customers. In the Fordist era of the two-tier labor system, it was the simple presence of trade unions, and not gaps in skills, that separated high-wage primary from low-wage secondary labor markets.

Accordingly, the education system (both at the high school and collegiate levels) is overdeveloped in relation to the needs of an economy that will only provide so many meaningful jobs that pay a living wage. So there exists a cruel disconnect between the managerial promises and the opportunities on the ground. While this disparity generates its share of social discontent, the expectations raised by these promises play a crucial role in regulating labor markets. In the sectors of mental work I have looked at here, the prospect of meaningful work provides a rationale for deprofessionalizing while helping to maintain a degraded labor market that disciplines and sets the wage floors of those precariously positioned in the core segments immediately above. In addition, and at a time (quite distinct from the Fordist era) when creative gratification is more and more pursued in the realm of work, the collective educational capital that once stimulated and supported consumption and leisure time is more and more invested in gray areas of unwaged work that the new cultural economy is creating. For example, in an article in this issue of *Social Text*, Tiziana Terranova outlines the role that free labor has played in building much of the Web site infrastructure of digital capitalism. Education is not, then, wasted, as it appears at first sight. Rather, it is systematically being converted into un- or undercompensated labor in ways that need to be adequately charted (just as the hidden costs of unwaged domestic labor of women have sustained the economy for much longer).

Insofar as we participate in this economy as scholars, writers, artists, or digital artisans, there is a responsibility to recognize the cost of our cherished beliefs in aesthetic or educational ideals. These ideals come at a price, and managers of the New Economy are taking full advantage of the opportunities that exist for capitalizing on our neglect of that price. Our traditions of indifference to the world of trade and waged labor are no longer charming eccentricities to be deemed objects of tourist interest in

Bohemia or the Ivory Tower, not when they are more and more central to a cultural economy that relies on them to further degrade the cost of labor.

Historically, noncommercial mental workers have found it too challenging, and professionally limiting, to see themselves as workers. Academics have often viewed their daily teaching and service obligations as a menial chore or necessary evil that allows them to pursue the life of the mind in their research—their “real” work—on sabbatical or in summer breaks. Artists contracted by federal or local government programs such as the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) (in the 1970s, the biggest public commitment to job subsidies since the WPA) routinely have made a distinction between what they do for a living in the realm of public and community arts, and their own after-hours work as expressive individuals.³² Even in the WPA years, many artists who qualified for poor relief refused federal assistance through the artists programs because they were averse to being classed as laborers (while others saw the program as a conspiracy to shut them up by offering full-time work). Writers of all stripes continue to regard part-time commercial work as a vile meal ticket that expedites their true calling.

There are sound reasons for abiding by such distinctions. Unpopular forms of intellectual, artistic, and political expression cannot and will not thrive unless they are independent of commercial or bureaucratic dictates. But these conditions of independence can no longer be “defended” stubbornly and solely as a matter of humanistic principle, or as a free-standing right of a civilized society. When capital-intensive industry is concentrated around vast culture trading sectors, when media Goliaths feed off their control of intellectual property, and when the new Vested Interests routinely barter discount wages for creative satisfaction on the job, the expressive traditions of mental labor are no longer “ours” simply to claim, not when informal versions of them are daily being bought off and refined into high-octane fuel for the next generation of knowledge factories.

Pioneer or avant-garde sectors of the new labor landscape must now play host to efforts to organize those whose professional identity has been based on a sharp indifference to being organized. Our common petitions can draw on an intimate and shared experience of the traditions of sacrificial labor. Those still in denial (usually the most secure) will swear off any and every affinity. It will take more than a leap of faith to establish any kind of solidarity among mental labor fractions divided by the legacy of (under-the-table or above-the-salt) privileges passed down over centuries. Nevertheless, while the chief blight of these centuries had been chattel slavery, serfdom, and indentured labor (and we are not done with these), we must now respond to that moment in the soulful lullaby of “Redemp-

tion Song” where Bob Marley soberly advises us: “Emancipate yourself from mental slavery.”

Because we cannot afford to believe that mental slavery has any less to do with labor than physical slavery did, some part of the task of modernizing labor politics in the age of dot-com and dot-edu (the age of the Yale Corporation, the Microserf, and the consolidated push of Time Warner–Bertelsmann–Disney–CNN–Hachette–Paramount–News Corp) lies in recognizing the special conditions that apply to pricing wages for thought. We have always known that aesthetics comes at a price, especially for those who do not benefit from the prestige it confers. Now we must learn to recognize that aesthetics is part of a price system, to use a pet phrase of Thorstein Veblen’s. No one has really thought this out properly. If we don’t, others, with less to lose and a world of lucrative copyrights to gain, will do it for us.

Notes

1. The faculty also includes jazz luminaries such as bassist Reggie Workman, saxophonist Billy Harper, pianist Joanne Brackeen, drummer Joe Chambers, trumpeter Cecil Bridgewater, and pianist Junior Mance.
2. See Thomas Bender’s account in *New York Intellect* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 296–300.
3. James McKeen Cattell, *University Control* (New York: Science, 1913), 17.
4. Thorstein Veblen, *The Higher Learning in America: A Memorandum on the Conduct of Universities by Business Men* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1918).
5. David Riesman, preface to *The Higher Learning*, xv.
6. Thorstein Veblen, *The Engineers and the Price System* (New York: Viking, 1921).
7. Some titles, predominantly relating to the for-profit sector, include: Lois Gray and Ronald Seeber, eds., *Under the Stars: Essays on Labor Relations in Arts and Entertainment* (Ithaca, N.Y.: ILR/Cornell University Press, 1996); Michael Storper, “The Transition to Flexible Specialization in the U.S. Film Industry,” *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 13 (1989): 273–305; Toby Miller, *Technologies of Truth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998) and “Television and Citizenship: A New International Division of Cultural Labor,” in *Communication, Citizenship, and Social Policy*, ed. Andrew Calabrese and Jean-Claude Burgelman (Boulder, Colo.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), 279–92.
8. John Kreidler, “Leverage Lost: The Nonprofit Arts in the Post-Ford Era,” *In Motion Magazine*, on-line at www.inmotionmagazine.com/lost.html.
9. Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).
10. William Baumol and William Bowen, *Performing Arts—The Economic Dilemma: A Study of Problems Common to Theater, Opera, Music, and Dance* (New York: Twentieth-Century Fund, 1966), 162.
11. William Bowen and Julie Ann Sosa, *Prospects for Faculty in the Arts and*

Sciences: A Study of Factors Affecting Supply and Demand, 1987 to 2012 (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989); and the later study, William Bowen and Neil Rudenstine, *In Pursuit of the Ph.D.* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992). It has been argued that Bowen's forecast of abundant jobs would have been realized if universities had not embarked, in the 1990s, on a full-scale program of casualizing its faculty workforce. If colleges were still hiring full-time tenure-track professors, instead of part-timers and adjuncts, today's labor supply would more closely approximate employer demand.

12. Ruth Towse, ed., *Baumol's Cost Disease: The Arts and Other Victims* (Northampton, Mass.: Edward Elgar, 1997).

13. George Yúdice, "The Privatization of Culture," *Social Text*, no. 59 (spring 1999): 17–34.

14. Gary Larson, *American Canvas: An Arts Legacy for Our Communities* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 1999), 127–28; cited in Yúdice, "The Privatization of Culture," 25.

15. See the NEA Research Division Notes on "Artist Employment in America," on-line at www.arts.endow.gov/pub.

16. NEA Research Division Note no. 73, April 1999.

17. Randy Martin, "Beyond Privatization: The Art and Society of Labor, Citizenship, and Consumerism," *Social Text*, no. 59 (spring 1999): 38–39.

18. Gray and Seeber, *Under the Stars*, 6.

19. See Andrew Ross, "Jobs in Cyberspace," in *Real Love: In Pursuit of Cultural Justice* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 7–34; and "Sweated Labor in Cyberspace," *New Labor Forum* 4 (spring 1999): 47–56. For an active Web site, see NetSlaves (Horror Stories of Working on the Web) at www.disobey.com/netslaves.

20. Baumol and Bowen, 99.

21. *Ibid.*, 371.

22. Linda Marie Fritschner, "Literary Agents and Literary Traditions: The Role of the Philistine," in *Paying the Piper: Cause and Consequences of Art Patronage*, ed. Judith Higgins Balfe (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 54–72. Also James Hepburn, *The Author's Empty Purse and the Rise of the Literary Agent* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968).

23. Harold Rosenberg, "The Profession of Art: The WPA Art Project," *Art on the Edge: Creators and Situations* (New York: Macmillan, 1975), 195–205.

24. Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the American Century* (New York: Verso, 1996).

25. C. Wright Mills, "The Cultural Apparatus," in *Power, Politics, and People*, ed. Irving Horowitz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), 405–22.

26. C. L. R. James, *American Civilization*, edited and introduced by Anna Grimshaw and Keith Hart, with an afterword by Robert A. Hill (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 123.

27. For analysis in general of these developments, see Cary Nelson, ed., *Will Teach for Food* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Randy Martin, ed., *Chalk Lines: The Politics of Work in the Managed University* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998); and Cary Nelson and Stephen Watt, *Academic Keywords: A Devil's Dictionary for Higher Education* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

28. A recent study of full-time faculty at sixteen midsized colleges and uni-

versities found faculty members worked an average of 53.6 hours per week. “Nota Bene,” *Academe* (July–August 1999): 11.

29. Alex Molnar, *Giving Kids the Business: The Commercialization of America’s Schools* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1996), 3.

30. *Ibid.*, chap. 2.

31. Henry C. Lucas Jr., *Information Technology and the Productivity Paradox: The Search for Value* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); John Thorp, *The Information Paradox: Realizing the Business Benefits of Information Technology* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1999); Leslie Willcocks and Stephanie Lester, eds., *Beyond the IT Productivity Paradox: Assessment Issues* (New York: John Wiley, 1999); Jessica Keyes, *Solving the Productivity Paradox: TQM for Computer Professionals* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994).

32. See Steven Dubin’s study of Chicago’s artists-in-residence programs funded by the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) in the late 1970s, *Bureaucratizing the Muse: Public Funds and the Cultural Worker* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

