

Can We, the Cultural Workers, Speak?

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The above title is a paraphrase of the title of Gayatri Spivak's influential text, used not to answer the particular question but to examine it instead. The reason we decided to use it as a starting point lies not only in the new modulations and regulations of work in the field of culture, i.e. the unequal proportions between paid and unpaid work, work and free time, and the increasing fragmentation of the work experience, but also the self-precarization, which is happening on all levels of life, and the lack of class consciousness and solidarity among those working in the field of culture / the new proletariat. This lack of solidarity is even more apparent when we look beyond the confines of the sphere of culture; cultural workers rarely act politically when one has to risk one's reputation or life for a political cause.

The question that comes to mind is: Why class consciousness? The new proletariat has not achieved any improvement in working conditions since the 1980s, under the illusion that capitalism was developing towards a higher form of labor and production, despite the fact that in some parts of the world immaterial labor has replaced industrial work. Contrary to expectations, the working class has not disappeared; it only expanded to include this new class of "overeducated and underemployed," which subsequently led to new forms of exploitation in the social fabric. Divisions within the working class have deepened, and the so-called cognitariat has become its most privileged section. What is more, the new hierarchy of struggle has given rise to another conflict which "fail[s] to anticipate the strategic moves by which capitalism can restructure the accumulation process by taking advantage of the inequalities within the global workforce," leading to friction within the working class, particularity of struggles, and the inability to interconnect.

Cultural workers can speak; the question is, though, can our speaking be heard? To whom are we speaking? And what are we speaking about? Is institutional critique the most radical position cultural workers can adopt?

At the same time, however, we should not replace action with speech; as Althusser reminds us, we should ascertain the effects that our speech produces, which means all the effects, both the internal and external. Another question to ask ourselves is what the responsibilities of cultural workers are, especially those of us who are professionally linked to institutions. How can we actually make the transition from merely saying something to having one's words affecting any real political impact?

Institutions consist not only of collections of art, archives, all manner of objects and other material as well as immaterial sources governed by the structural norms prescribing research, evaluation procedures, educational policies (and consequently their political and ideological dimensions), and displays of objects and documents (in this way constructing certain histories and values). They are also subjects, a work force, human machines with real bodies and emotions that are behind these processes. These subjects consist not only of the immaterial workers, but also of the very people who contribute to the development of both "weightless commodities" and material objects. To formulate this in traditional jargon: while some are enjoying the products of their work, others, within the same work process, feel alienated from the products of their labor.

What is missing in most discourses on this subject today is concrete and radical proposals on how to separate culture from ideology, and an understanding of how the different levels of hegemony, exploitation and power relations manifest themselves in culture. The problem is primarily how to identify these issues in a way that would allow the multiple struggles in one field (i.e., culture) to connect with the struggles in other parts of the social factory. Or, as the students of the UC Santa Cruz put it in their manifesto: a free university in an unfree world is worthless; it can hardly exist. That is why cultural workers must address, in addition to the particular issues concerning their status, also the broader social issues surrounding the revolution of the everyday.

Another topic about which a great deal has been written lately is the new institutions: what they should and could be and where their alliances lie. Art institutions, for example, have been reconsidering their constituent practices and possible associations between movements and institutions, reexamining their role in society, and promoting openness, transversality, critique, fluidity etc. What raises some doubt, however, is the fact that in so doing they have not only effortlessly adopted certain Deleuzian terminology but also obfuscated, particularly in the form of institutional critique, the potential for political transformation in the field of culture. There have been attempts in the sphere of arts to create a form of social configuration that extends beyond existing social forms, such as the many participatory-multicultural projects proposing different social relations and new communities but, at the same time, unable to extend to the “real” work environment of the place where the projects took place. However, such temporary solidarities, identifications between minorities, marginalized and other groups – “[the] projections of politics as other and outside [only] detract from a politics of here and now”. Do we then seriously believe that the new institutions could eventually become a field of “politics of experimentation”?

Such obfuscations as those described above enable capital to mobilize our unconscious potentials (ideas, creativity, affects etc.) and neutralize the “politics of potential” within the field of culture. What we need, here and now, is a new vocabulary for the constitution of political subjects with both social and political responsibilities: subjects that would not simply constitute an apolitical, narcissistic elite producing critical theory only to justify their disregard of the need for radical change in the social fabric, always waiting for some kind of authority to grant them “the power and the truth of experience”; but subjects that would be able to recognize the hegemony and power and to question the political status quo in the institutions, as well as to employ a kind of “strategic essentialism” for common social action. We often hear about dissident subjectivities, about counter behaviors and the like, but do we really know how to become such dissidents? Political subjectivities that have arisen in recent years (within the alter-globalist movement, for example) are in crisis. This crisis results from drastic transformations in the production process and the (re)composition of the labor force, in the new modulations of work, the increasing criminalization of political subjects and, last but not least, in the speed with which capitalism foresees and forestalls any deviations in the “molar machine”.

The question thus remains: how to invent new political praxis and how to think it within the institutions?

Starting from these paradigms Radical Education Collective has initiated a small-scale research process which goes beyond the subject-researcher and object-researched division and, based on co-research (with the researchers being connected with various academic and/or art institutions), discloses the modes and different levels of researchers’ exploitation as well as the ways in which to employ this newly produced knowledge to work toward social transformation. In other words, research is designed for the co-researchers to learn social and political responsibility by experiencing it through the process of political self-emancipation; that is, in the words of Marx, emancipation of workers must come from the workers themselves.

The research is based on Marx’s Workers’ Inquiry from 1881, when the *Revue Socialiste* asked him to carry out a study into the conditions of the French proletariat. We realize, though, that relying on Marx too literally would be problematic, as the questions he posed are largely obsolete and his “ontology closes off any possibility of innovation.” The potential lies in rereading him: “to read Marx not so much as a thinker, [but] rather as someone who demands his theory to become socially effective”. That was also the idea underpinning the research process: not to simply use his questions but to compose new, relevant ones that would respond to current working conditions and life situations. The answers reveal, similarly to what the editors of the *New International* wrote in 1938, that “no one will doubt [...], more shockingly and brutally today than fifty years ago: the incalculable, hideous cost that the masses of humanity pay for the continuance of the rule of capitalism.”

Some of the questions that were posed are as follows, accompanied by short analyses of the answers we received while working together on a translation of the Workers’ Inquiry.

- What kind of contract do you have in the museum? Government employee / Freelance / Fixed-term contract / Short-term contract / Service contract?

- Apart from the usual and regularly employed workers, are there others who come in at definite seasons?

One of the first questions we encounter with the workers inquiry is the question about the type of work contract with an institution. Even though we are mostly talking about cultural workers here, we should not forget about the “other” workers within the whole cultural sector: the cleaning and security services, the outsourcing, the migrant work ... and their life and work conditions. The kind of contract you have changes in a crucial way the conditions of your work – it is a decisive starting point for us because it sets one of the main differences among the various kinds of workers you can find in a cultural institution like the MNCARS and the inequality of conditions that this implies.

- In case your position is temporary, how does this condition your life? Would you prefer to have a permanent position?

- What agreements do you have with your employer? Are you engaged by the day, week, month, etc.?

It is difficult to think of having a permanent employment today, but, on the other hand, being a temp worker is also something that many would consider as an acceptable option in order not to adapt to the constraints of an institution. At best, this kind of employment could be an expression of autonomy, freedom and self-determination. But there are differences among the precarious workers: some have chosen these kinds of living and working conditions while the majority was forced into them. Precarious work has become a part of the transformation toward a neoliberal form of governmentality. The reality then is that this kind of work has not become an alternative to the nine to five working hour schedule, but has turned instead into non-stop availability, flexible working hours, blurring of work and free time, that is – it extended work into our emotions, into our entire life.

- Do you have Health Insurance? Is it Social Security or Private Insurance? Is it covered by your employer? Are your social security contributions taken into account for your unemployment insurance?

- Are there, in your workshop or trade, any friendly societies to provide for accidents, sickness, death, temporary incapacity, old age, etc.?

What is problematic about almost all forms of flexible employment is the absence of (any) security, which subsequently leads to fear of social decline and poverty. The possibility of having access to unemployment insurance is accessible to some of the workers, only the ones with a permanent position.

- What kind of separation can you make between your work and your life?

- In the connection with the development of machinery and the growth of the productiveness of labor, has its intensity and duration increased or decreased?

In the sphere of culture, jobs used to have a vocational component and intrinsic self-motivation, and this identity dimension makes the boundaries between the subject and his work more blurry. In this sense, free time often takes place in the same or similar contexts, also considering that the social and professional networks in this field are often interconnected. One aspect of flexibility that characterizes the jobs in the field of culture is the high degree of availability that is demanded of workers, working time is less framed, dissolving personal and professional sphere ... and this ‘double affectation’ can intensify its precarious dimension.