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WORK

Introduction: work

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Introduction: work

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We present this special issue of the *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* on work with a certain sense of the topic's cruel irony in a time of widespread unemployment and economic misery. But it is perhaps only during such times that we can begin to examine our relationships with our work and how culture and ideology shape them. Phrases like "the job market" and "unemployment rate" should remind us that Marx's central insight was that capital's reduction of labor to a commodity creates perverse economic, social, and political relationships. Such insight certainly does not depend on the labor theory of value. Even after Keynes, economists still tend to treat labor like a commodity traded at its marginal rate of utility, albeit one with a rather sticky set of prices.

In the neoliberal era, globalization not only creates an international labor market premised on this perverted understanding of Adam Smith's invisible hand but also an ideology in which work itself becomes a commodity in which workers speculate. Thus the notion of "career management"—as described by Carrie Lane in this issue—becomes a kind of self-speculation undertaken by workers in order to advance their own self-interests, leading to a work culture marked by cynicism and opportunism, as Paolo Virno has aptly noted. The notion of a work-commodity means that work itself can be abundant or scarce like any other commodity, which further naturalizes so-called "flexible employment." The current unemployment crisis has extended this exciting new speculative opportunity in one's future to more of the U.S. population. We are all capitalists and speculators with our small holdings of cheap labor, however, our inability to find the proper speculative opportunities—e.g. employment, in whatever form—is, of course, our own fault.

The ideology of the work-commodity tells us that, even though U.S. wages have stagnated over the last thirty years while the world's wealthiest entered a new gilded age, we have wasted our resources.

Waste is no new topic to the IJCS. Indeed, our previous special issue on waste did not simply consider the problem of wasted resources but used work as its subtending critical matrix. We were not so much interested in waste as a thing but as an object that appeared at the limits of capital's command and demanded some new form of work, whether material, immaterial, or ideological. Waste offered an opportunity to think about what work at the limits of capital could mean for the future of social production. After all, Marx noted that capitalism did not appear *sui generis* but emerged first as usury "in the pores of production" (*Capital* 3, 733). We had asked about waste, and attempted some answers to that problem, but at the end of the process we realized that a new question had materialized with some force: which forms of work inhabit the pores of capital and what do they mean for those engaged with them?

The answers offered by our contributors focus on cognitive and affective work: the labor of producing codes, signs, and language, or providing services. Such work is of course not new, but its productive economic role is. In the eighteenth and nineteenth century, political economists argued over the status of such work. Since it did not produce some physical commodity that could support the reproduction of capital, labor, or life, intellectual and service labor was often considered parasitic. That's not to say that it did not have its enthusiasts. After all, if unproductive labor included managerial or cognitive labor, then the entire system of capital described by political economy tended toward the conclusions of working-class political economists like John Bray. Thus Nassau Senior traced a problematic and clearly ideological continuum of labor that made service labor, productive labor, and capitalist abstinence equally productive. Marx thought so highly of Senior's work that he called it "horse piss" and declared that by Senior's reasoning "the pickpocket becomes a productive worker too, since he indirectly produces books on criminal law" (*Grundrisse* 273). John Stuart Mill rebuked Senior in more muted terms, declaring that even though unproductive labor "may be as useful as productive labor," because it produces no physical commodity, "society or mankind grow no richer by it, but poorer" (75). With the rise of marginal utility theory, the category simply fell into disuse because, as William Stanley Jevons wrote, "the sole end of all industry is to satisfy our wants" (262). If your work satisfies someone's wants, then you can trade it as a commodity with that person. Problem solved.

Neoliberalism's interest in such unproductive labor exists largely because capital no longer relies on the material productive capacity of human labor. In an era of automation and scientific production, the production of knowledge has become capital's central productive form. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri initially dubbed this "immaterial labor" but have now settled upon the more appropriate "biopolitical labor." While this labor forms the basis of contemporary capitalism, its creation of new forms of social relationships, not just within production but across the social world, also intensifies social relations beyond capitalist rationalization or capture. This is the other side of flexibilization: if biopolitical labor increasingly creates value outside the wage relation, then our work and its products are increasingly

autonomous from capital's control. Our hope is that this issue on work will help us to consider what we choose to do with this autonomy and how we choose to confront the ideology of the work-commodity.

We begin with an interview of documentary poet Mark Nowak by Philip Metres. In this interview, Nowak discusses his practice of documentary poetry and his work toward what he calls "writing from the working-class movement's needs." To this end, Nowak describes his recent work conducting readings and workshops outside colleges and bookstores, including union halls, public libraries and centers serving working-class communities, conferences on labor history, and in factories between shifts. We are pleased to be able to present their wide-ranging discussion on poetry and the challenges that confront poets as they write and teach poetry in academia and the world at large.

We then move into our essays for this issue, beginning with Derek Nystrom's "The Gaze at Work: Knowledge Relations and Class Spectatorship," which offers an important theoretical intervention in film studies's theory of the gaze. Developing ideas from his *Hard Hats, Rednecks, and Macho Men: Class in 1970s American Cinema* (2009), Nystrom links Taylorism and popular cinema to identify what he calls "the managerial gaze" operating in classical cinematic narration. This gaze is tied to an epistemic class struggle, most especially the middle class's need to continually redefine itself in relation to the working-class and capital. Like the middle class, the managerial gaze is hegemonic, partial, and contradictory—offering a "particular kind of pleasure in knowing" but also insights into the faults of this position and possibilities of useful, white collar work.

In "If the shoe ain't your size, it ain't gonna fit," Carrie Lane also develops conclusions made in previously published work. In her essay "Man Enough to Let My Wife Support Me" (2009), Lane described how high-tech jobseekers in her study posited marriage as a "partnership of equals" that helped keep them afloat between jobs. This suggested progressive ideas about gender roles in the family. However, in this essay, Lane discusses signs of the limits of the dual-earner safety net called to her attention after several men from her study reported impending divorces. When listening to one worker describe his lay off and ending marriage with the same metaphor—the shoe not fitting—Lane recognizes a discourse at work: "Attributing these difficulties to "fit" and personality renders invisible alternative way[s] of explaining, and attributing blame for, the unfortunate end of a marriage."

Steven Sheehan's essay also explores an ideology beneficial to business, but from an earlier period, before the fall-out of the contract between employers and workers, and from the perspective of business. In "Better Citizens through *Better Living*," Steven Sheehan demonstrates through examples how Du Pont's employee magazine *Better Living* 'sold' its employees "a vision of 'better living,' based on the enjoyment of a material prosperity that could only be generated by unregulated capitalism" in the 1940s through the 1960s. The magazine used "simple charts and graphs, and more importantly posed photographs of Du Pont employees" (17) that emphasized the material abundance of American workers compared to the past and other countries, and presented this abundance as threatened by taxes and working-class movements. Sheehan's essay gives (often humorous) specificity to the history of business's post-

war campaigns of conservatism and places Du Pont at the forefront of this effort.

Although it also looks critically at propaganda, the last essay, “Vera Brittain’s Testaments of Labor, Work, and Action” by Austin Riede, presents a different type of discussion on work. Here, Riede argues that Brittain’s memoir of her life in England before, during, and after the First World War “exemplifies the three categories of labor, work, and action Hannah Arendt would later define in *The Human Condition* (1958).” Riede offers a compelling reading of Brittain’s ambivalence about her ‘labor’ as a nurse during the war, torn between her respect for her generation’s sacrifice and her condemnation of the war. Riede argues that Brittain’s memoirs present “a philosophy of labor” and the self that can be put in dialogue with Arendt and Foucault and with the conditions and limits of her generation.

We are also pleased to present a roundtable among faculty of Bryant University’s First Year Liberal Arts Seminar for 2009-2010, who chose the theme of Work for the year. The roundtable participants discuss teaching critical writing, thinking, and analysis through the theme of work during the economic crisis and at a University that is known as a business college but that also has a growing liberal arts component. They describe how work can be a valuable way to engage students in an introductory writing and critical thinking class. This roundtable provides a wonderful bridge to our forum on Writing at the University, a collection of short essays from scholars in a variety of fields on the multiplicity of writing practices within the University.

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