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Labour and passion

Introduction to themed section

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DOI

[10.1177/1367549414563301](https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549414563301)

Publication date

2015

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

European Journal of Cultural Studies

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Hermes, J. (2015). Labour and passion: Introduction to themed section. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 18(2), 111-116. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549414563301>

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Labour and passion: Introduction to themed section

European Journal of Cultural Studies

1-6

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DOI: 10.1177/1367549414563301

ecs.sagepub.com

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Abstract

In this introduction to the themed section on 'Labour and passion', it is argued that work has bled into all areas of life. Political economists and media production researchers have shown how both paid and unpaid labour are singularly important and build upon one another. The set of articles presented here is the precursor to a general issue on Media and Passion (to be published later). It is the result of the same invitation. The articles can be seen to show how neo-liberalism may have convinced us that work is the ultimate definer of individual identity but that this invitation is meaningless without the energy of passion, emotion and affect. The articles in the themed section address creative work generally, song-writing and self-help guides for those seeking work. The link between cultural studies and political economy is re-established. Wrestling last but not least proves the ultimate example that paid labour and free labour can both be a labour of love. Without the passionate involvement of sportsmen, organizers and audience members, it would not exist.

Keywords

Labour, passion, political economy, creative work, neo-liberalism

Since the early 2000s, a great number of governments have declared the creative industries the saving grace of western economies, according to which their innovative power combined with their unique structuring of work, mainly performed by free-lancers, will renew and invigorate across the board. In addition, the independent professionals of the creative industries are hailed as 'free agents' and generally seen as following their passions rather than the need to pay a mortgage. All in all, we seem to be witnessing a new

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phase in the concerted effort to convince all of us that it is work that makes our lives meaningful. The argument is currently stretched to the extent that actually being paid for work seems to be a secondary consideration. For example, centres for art and debate, quality newspapers and television production companies depend on the work of volunteers and interns, eager for work experience, who are paid very little, if at all. This has sparked discussions from an older mould. In creative work especially (but also elsewhere), a new 'precariat' is forming (Ross, 2009). The distinction between work and non-work has become permeable. What the Italian Autonomists have called the 'social factory' has become a fact of life (Terranova, 2013). Short term, underpaid and 'free' labour fits today's capitalist economies well. How interesting therefore that an invitation from a guest editor and an editor of this journal for contributions on the twin themes of 'media and passion' also resulted in discussions of work.

The 'labour and passion' themed set of articles presented here is the prelude to the broader scope of a Media and Passion Special Issue that will be published later this year. It underscores how the cool rationality of neo-liberal government requires feeling and energy, emotions and affect. 'Passion' captures all of that, including its original reference to negative emotions and suffering, for example, in Christian theology. Understanding labour from the perspective of 'passion' thus affords us food for thought. It points to the double logic that appears to be needed to understand identity formation and the construction of meaning in everyday life: the very remit of cultural studies. Further discussion of passion will be left to the upcoming Media and Passion Special Issue.

Cultural studies initially tended to ignore sites of production as a valuable part of the circuit of cultural production. Although acknowledging these as important to meaning making, earlier discussion was wary of privileging the meaning making of the media. Thus, attention focussed on the readings of cultural texts and the everyday use of media, especially popular forms. While an interest in work and work cultures was never totally absent (e.g. DuGay, 1998), it has recently become the subject of stronger scrutiny. McRobbie's work on fashion designers would be a good example or Mayer, Banks and Caldwell's work in media production studies (Caldwell, 2008; McRobbie, 1998; Mayer et al., 2009). Interesting in this regard is the renewed combination of political economy and media and cultural studies (e.g. Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011). This re-engagement is clearly also fuelled by the recent turn in government policies that see gigantic opportunities in 'the creative industries' as mentioned above (Garnham, 2005; Hartley, 2005). The political-economic approach, however, ultimately lacks the means to understand how or why individual workers would acquiesce in their exploitation, a question cultural studies is better equipped to tackle. Cultural studies, on the other hand, need political economy's insight into corporate power, ownership, control and business modelling. Or, to put it more specifically, into how, when and where value is produced. As labour is ultimately the only source of value in a Marxist frame of reference, understanding the three-part split of straightforward 'labour' into material, 'free' and immaterial labour benefits from the combination of both approaches. Cultural studies' project of inquiring into the nature of meaning production in everyday life thus collides with the neo-liberal project. Neo-liberal government aims to naturalise and sell back such phenomena as outsourcing and the flexibilisation of work as the current solutions for capitalism's inherent flaws. Today, that includes the managing of economic crises and the

attainment of the highest possible degree of innovation. Interestingly, these problems are apparently easier to solve if we believe that 'work' is what makes life meaningful for individuals.

Along these lines, labour and passion prove to be a powerful combination of terms to address current economic, cultural and social developments. They concern the status of work and of money, how we want to work and how 'work' consequently is redefined. Labour is no longer part of 'the other world' in which work is meaningful if you are lucky, as the opposite of leisure time and the opposite of those moments that are most real and genuinely personal. Now work encapsulates the real meaning of life. Work, and especially creative work, is how we know who we are. Academics know this from experience, but it is arguably the creative cultural industries that bring these transformations into high relief. Creative industries as a separate economic domain (including media, the arts, design but also communicative business services, at least in the Netherlands) were given an unexpected boost a decade earlier by digitalisation. Cutting back on the cost of labour via outsourcing became a viable option for businesses, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and governments as it became so much easier for individual creative workers to run their own small business, often from home. Of interest in this regard is the inclusion of media and communicative business services in governmental definitions of the creative industries. The link back to work such as Melissa Gregg's on the information industries is easily made. Rather than an abstract worker, we can see how actual people, in this case women, especially made use of technological innovation to start working from home and to combine paid labour and the free labour of taking care of households and children (Gregg, 2011). Likewise, Arlie Hochschild's writing on emotional labour and later work on the commercialisation of intimate life point to the need to re-understand apparently technological changes via older interpretative frames and divisions of labour (Hochschild, 2012, 1997, 1983)

To return to work on the political economy of the media, authors such as Dallas Smythe (1977) have argued that in our 'free time', we do more work than is usually acknowledged. Some of that work is simply considered very low status (e.g. household chores), and in other cases, we do not want to define 'doing things' as work for fear of spoiling how good they can feel (e.g. going to a gym, working in the garden or watching television). Academic work itself is a good example here (Kuipers, 2014). We work out of a sense of obligation or a calling even, and love parts of what we do. Writing an article in the evenings or over weekends can feel like a luxury, much closer to a hobby than to actual labour. No matter that articles generate points for rankings that in turn are 'monetized' by attracting more students or research funding. Thus, across different occupational sectors, work is and has been bleeding into 'free' time and is becoming less and less distinguishable from it. This raises a plethora of questions to do with exploitation, ownership and identity but also those to do with pleasure, belonging and recognition.

The articles in this themed section are a first attempt to map out this nascent field, and to link them to earlier work that has been done in cultural studies (in terms of topic area and questions, and in terms of the methods developed and used). Thus, the central question for this themed section is to inquire into the nature of creative work.

The articles by Hope and Richards, and by Long and Barber focus on those who willingly allow themselves to be exploited (in the eyes of some) because they love the work

they do. Both articles address how passion and emotion are crucial to songwriters, to actors and all those others who feel 'creative labour' captures exactly what they do. 'Good work' and 'immaterial labour' are crucial notions to understand the layered meanings of work, including its benefits in terms of pride and identity formation. 'Good work', for instance, needs to be understood beyond happiness and pleasure as the opposite of 'bad work' which is the work you have no control over, that is boring or makes you feel ashamed, frustrating self-realisation. Apart from terms used by Hesmondhalgh and Baker's (2011) earlier project from which these categories are taken, Hope and Richards' informants also included 'artistic' in their description of good work. The artist clearly is the prototype of the flexible, creative worker who does not give a damn about formalised structures including a guaranteed salary, sick pay or a pension. This makes it difficult to think of what can be done collectively to ameliorate the often bad working conditions of creative workers.

Long and Barber also work from interview material, in their case with an array of songwriters whose professional identities appear to be highly ambiguous. They are both artists and 'professional tunesmiths', that is, hands for hire. Equally clearly, their inquiry into songwriting as work focusses on the actuality of creative work. It is both labour and a special and innate gift. Passion is a key term in understanding how such work is meaningful: there is a sense of talent being liberated. In this way, work is constructed as a form of freedom. Although the argument is technically correct that the interviewed workers are exploited, clearly that does not capture the experience or the meaning of work for those doing it. As Long and Barber put it, 'the nature of how songwriters feel about their craft individualised through the stamp of their emotional input, seems to distance it from the "taint" of the corporate realm'. This then calls for a new type of politics that should mesh well with the project of cultural studies: to understand everyday meaning production as part of and produced in unequal power relations.

Bonini and Arvidsson's contribution, the article which follows, re-establishes the link between cultural studies and political economy. Political economists of the media have argued in strong terms that the business models of the media industries exploit audiences. Notably, Dallas Smythe (1977) argued that viewers are sold as eyeballs to advertisers (the more the better, the higher the price of an advertisement) and that those same ads roped them in as unpaid marketeers to sell new products. Bonini and Arvidsson argue the need to revisit this model of what political economists like to call 'audience value' given the arrival of participatory media culture. To do so, they dissect the underlying preoccupations of early market research and its transformations. They suggest that the formation of publics should be understood in line with Gabriel Tarde's work as 'occurring through dynamic processes in which a singular "passion" is diffused through a mediated assembly of people'. Tarde, of course, is best known as the author of the *Psychology of the Crowd* which first appeared in 1895. Tarde helps us understand how audiences are *producers*, and that, for example, brand management rests on their productive power, as well as the maintenance of specific value conventions (e.g. what is and is not 'cool'). They follow this argument through to interrogate today's 'financialized bio-economy' to understand passion-as-value. To say more would be to spoil the pleasure of reading this article.

Annette Hill addresses live wrestling events. The article is easily recognisable as establishing a link to cultural studies' empirical tradition. It is based on participant observation and long interviews, and queries how a form of entertainment is meaningful to its participants. What is new here is that it insists on how wrestling is co-produced by organisers, wrestlers and audiences who all perform specific forms of labour, that in the end produce a 'spectacle of excess'. Labour clearly is much more than waged labour; it is part and parcel of an all-encompassing form of engagement on the part of all the participants. Wrestlers often used to be fans and they do pay for their passion. For example, upon retirement, many have horrifying long-term injuries. Yet, on the other hand, many other creative workers will be envious of how everybody can be passionate and excessive without having to turn it into a work skill.

The last contribution, by Hong, takes a closer look at how work is framed by and part of current 'governmentality', the 'organized practices (mentalities, rationalities, and techniques) through which subjects are governed' (Mayhew, 2004). The article discusses career guides and their neo-liberal insistence that only those will be 'rewarded' who sell themselves body and soul, who bow to the system with total sincerity. In this way, passionate work, argues Hong, is an injunction. While the guides offer empowerment, they also discipline us to work harder. In a way, passion ironically can only be claimed by the successful; those of us seeking work mostly need endless energy.

All in all, then, the issue offers a dual argument. Labour is clearly a more and more distinctly important part of personhood for all workers (and not just for middle-class men). This begs the question of redefining labour, work and identity construction from the perspective that pressure and exploitation are as important as the pleasure we have in some kinds of work (while clearly not in others), but also from the perspective that global and local inequalities regarding work conditions are mystified by overall definitions of work as either exploitation or freedom. It is difficult moreover not to insist on the human dignity of having space to define who you are rather than be defined by the system at hand as solely an agent of production.

These papers suggest in different ways that the key to this critique and inquiry is the unexpectedly strong link between labour and passion. Even those, or especially those critical of neo-liberal government, are clearly affected by the formal insistence on rationality, contracts, productivity, scores and rankings. Academic work is surely a case in point (see Miller, 2007 for an elaborate argument). Rather than solely foreground the pleasure of work, as according to some happened in the earlier discussion of audience practices (regarding media use), discussion today takes into account the double-edged nature of how and why some of us can and should value work, how others value the work but are and need to be very critical of work conditions and still others who have to struggle to make a living doing work that has no link whatsoever to creativity or, in some cases, human dignity. A passion for work (either in doing it or discussing it, which again might be one's job) will have to make clear the multi-layered reality of work and work conditions. Discussion of labour using passion as a vector allows us to understand energy, affect, identity and exploitation beyond the purely rational and the contract. It shows us how all work ultimately invests in coming closer to forms of excess, if not perhaps as directly or to the extent that the wrestling matches manage to do.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Annette Hill and Ann Gray for labour given in and as friendship.

Funding

This themed section is one of the outcomes of the 2013 Media and passion conference organised at the University of Lund by Annette Hill. We gratefully acknowledge the funding of this conference by the Swedish Research Council.

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Biographical note

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