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Katherine Stubbs

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Introduction

by KATHERINE STUBBS

Everything is relative, everything is in chains. Capitalism is a condition both of the world and of the soul.

—Franz Kafka

EACH OF THE ARTICLES in this special issue can be understood as an illustration of Franz Kafka's observation that capitalism "is a condition both of the world and of the soul." Kafka's assertion is another way of saying that capitalism is perpetuated not only through the reproduction of concrete material conditions but also through the individual's imagined relation to those conditions—that is, through the reproduction of ideology. Louis Althusser has proposed a helpful way of understanding how ideology functions, how it is internalized and reproduced. Althusser focuses on the process through which individuals are constituted as subjects. He argues that ideology operates by "hailing" the individual. In responding to this address—in recognizing this call as directed at him or her—the individual is interpellated as a subject. The process of interpellation is not discrete or episodic; it is ongoing, incessant. Our subjectivity is thus always already structured by and through ideology. Althusser's concept enables us to begin to identify the mechanisms through which ideology becomes invested in subjectivity.

The essays collected here are all, in various ways, concerned with registering the way work interpellates subjects. One of the most salient ways we are produced as subjects within ideology is through the work we perform. Even in early childhood our subjectivity is shaped in relation to work. In being repeatedly asked, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" and in learning how to reply to such a question, we are being taught several things. We are being instructed that in order to achieve adulthood we must become workers within the capitalist economy. We are being encouraged to believe that our very identity will be predicated on what job we perform—for what we *are* is understood to be equivalent to what we do for a living. And we are being sent a very clear message: the answer we give to this question will be used to classify us.

In exploring the set of representations in circulation around certain sorts of work, we become capable of apprehending one of the mechanisms through

which ideology is reproduced in subjectivity; in charting the cultural meanings assigned to different kinds of work, we witness how individuals are positioned within social formations. Once such a project might have seemed straightforward; when Marx wrote of a nineteenth-century industrial economy, he defined work in terms of productive labor and was able to distinguish between two clearly delineated classes of individuals. The essays in this issue confront the question of how we are to conceive or reconceive of work at a later historical moment when a culture of production seems to have been replaced by a culture of consumption. Under such conditions, what economic, social, and cultural influences now shape our understanding of ourselves?

The first two essays concentrate on the early and mid-twentieth century, exploring the issue of work and subjectivity by focusing on cultural production and reception, on fiction and its readership. In "Dressed to Kill: Hard-Boiled Detective Fiction, Working-Class Consumers, and Pulp Magazines," Erin Smith examines the constitution of working-class male subjectivity in relation to the phenomenon of hard-boiled detective fiction. Smith begins by locating the provenance of this fiction, tracing its origins to nineteenth-century dime novels and following the development of the genre in twentieth-century pulp magazines and in paperbacks. According to ethnographic data, the readership of hard-boiled detective fiction was composed primarily of working-class men; Smith asks questions about how such readers used detective narratives. Because this population left few records of their responses to what they read, Smith suggests that other sources of information must be consulted. She argues that the advertisements placed in pulp magazines served a pedagogical function, and she sees in these advertisements the same tensions that surface in the detective narratives themselves: a tension between the values and modes of subjectivity associated with a producer culture and the values and modes of subjectivity associated with a consumer culture. She asks: "What constituted 'manhood' in a world where skilled artisanal work and the family wage that used to accompany it were both eroding? Where did it leave a working man when his social position depended increasingly on the consumer goods he could (or could not) afford to buy? Could a worker reconcile his artisanal character with the impression management increasingly necessary to get ahead in the modern world?" In her readings of a series of detective novels, Smith suggests that this fiction was in a profoundly ambivalent relation to commodity culture. Throughout her article Smith's elucidation of both the context and the content of hard-boiled detective fiction demonstrates that understanding this cultural form means understanding how it was positioned—and how it positioned itself—in relation to powerful cultural and social hierarchies.

Where Smith's article registers the transition from a culture of production to a culture of consumption in terms of working-class men, Jennifer Parchesky's article, "The Business of Living and the Labor of Love: Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Feminism, and Middle-Class Redemption," charts how this transition was managed for and by what was termed the "new middle class." Parchesky focuses on the middlebrow novelist and cultural arbiter Dorothy Canfield Fisher, studying how this writer responded to the problem of work in the early and mid-twentieth century by developing "a remarkably coherent, practical, and inspiring vision of the nature and purpose of work in the modern era." Parchesky notes that Canfield focused on the middle-class family as a site of crisis, an arena where commodity culture had destabilized conventional roles and identities. Parchesky suggests that Canfield advocated moving beyond a primarily consumerist model of selfhood; while Canfield acknowledged the pleasures associated with consumption, she also emphasized the need to discover or invent identities and values associated with "new kinds of purposeful activity appropriate to a modern era." In defining these new kinds of work, Canfield included traditional productive labor but also emphasized the importance of unrecognized—and largely feminized—forms of social, cultural, and emotional labor. Parchesky argues that Canfield elevated activities considered "women's work" into a paradigm for meaningful labor, in part because such work was perceived as enhancing interpersonal connections. Parchesky concludes by foregrounding the degree to which Canfield was concerned with attitudes and perceptions, emotional and moral states; Canfield's project for redefining work is thus seen as intimately bound up with the production and reproduction of a certain mode of middle-class subjectivity.

The next essays concentrate on our own historical moment, studying the material practices of dance and play respectively by understanding these as forms of work that shape subjectivity. Heather J. Hicks's "Postindustrial Striptease: *The Full Monty* and the Feminization of Work" returns to many of the issues raised by Smith, but explores the constitution of working-class male subjectivity in a postindustrial setting. Hicks begins by citing Donna Haraway's contention that contemporary work must be understood according to a spectrum of stereotypes associated with females. Haraway's representation of the feminization of work is cast in negative terms. Hicks counters by suggesting that there are characteristics associated with the stereotype of the "feminine"—characteristics such as cooperativeness and empathy—which can be viewed as potentially liberating, as enabling forms of solidarity among workers. In order to consider how the feminization of work might be seen as a positive development, Hicks takes as a case study the 1997 film *The Full Monty*. Her interpretation of this film centers around the striptease in which

the unemployed working-class male protagonists engage. Hicks argues that the film “neither renders this feminization in purely negative terms, nor dismisses conventions of masculinity entirely from its picture of contemporary work. Instead, by intermittently depicting the striptease as a skilled form of dance, the comedy brings images of collectivity and skill together in an alternative, positive image of feminization.” Here Hicks reads the social ritual of dance as a staging ground in which issues of power are made visible and negotiated. At a moment when economic conditions have rendered conventional gender roles no longer tenable, the men use their performance to act out the contradictions associated with their new social and economic position. Hicks suggests that in a postindustrial context, the redefinition of work is inextricable from the redefinition of what constitutes male and female, masculine and feminine. This new world order, she holds, requires more fluid selves and more flexible notions of gender.

Finally, in “Playtime: Toys and the Labor of Childhood,” Jane Kuenz discusses children’s play as a form of culturally meaningful labor. Kuenz asserts that “children’s play is really a form of work, one that poses as an alternative to the adult world, yet which habituates children to their future labor in it, of which consumption is a significant part.” Kuenz frames children’s play in terms of commodity culture, the mass-produced toys marketed to children; she argues that the political valence and ideological implications of these commodities are complicated and often highly contradictory. Throughout her article, Kuenz argues against a simplistic understanding of children’s play, against the tendency of adults to impose their own interpretations on children’s activity. Instead, she insists, we must recognize that children have agency and a critical capacity; they are capable of “creating, shaping, and using their own fantasies.” While children’s toys are often packaged and promoted in ways that reproduce aspects of dominant culture, these objects are used by children in a variety of unpredictable ways. In drawing attention to the charged contemporary debates around children, children’s play, and children’s toys, Kuenz’s article suggests that in contemporary American culture there is widespread uncertainty about the role of children—a systemic anxiety about what kinds of subjects children are and should be. Where the first three articles investigate subjects’ attempts to come to terms with a culture where consumption seems to have replaced production as an arena where subjectivity is produced and shaped, Kuenz’s article reveals that the stakes are highest when what is being produced is the future generation of capitalist subjects.

In surveying the essays gathered in this issue, we glimpse some of the areas of inquiry and methods of approach currently being used by a new generation of scholars in American literary and cultural studies. There are unmis-

takable similarities among these essays. Each of these articles bears witness to a tension or contradiction within late capitalism. One such tension occurs when changes in economic and social conditions are unevenly incorporated within individual subjectivities—as when a transition from a culture of production to a culture of consumption seems to render old roles and modes of subjectivity precarious or outdated. At moments when the workplace and marketplace are being dramatically reconfigured, we also encounter competing ethical values, such as the conflict between individualistic and communitarian impulses.

In studying how the contradictions posed by capitalism surface symbolically, these scholars demonstrate a broad and inclusive sense of what constitutes a symbolic act. Written discourse (middlebrow and lowbrow, literary as well as nonliterary texts), popular culture, material practices, social rituals, and commodities are all recognized as worthy of analysis. Each of the articles in this issue reconstructs a context for a symbolic act, framing it as a product of and response to a concrete historical situation. The meaning of a given symbolic act is not considered to be univocal or stable. In mapping the emergence of meaning through a series of contestations, these scholars are attentive to the issue of audience response, to the question of how a symbolic act is received, interpreted, and used by different populations. Frequently, what is revealed is a struggle between hegemonic cultural voices and more marginal voices.

In each essay we watch dominant ideologies being reproduced, as subjectivity and social relations are determined by larger structures, by economic conditions and the logic of the market. But we also note moments when the reproduction of ideology is not total; at such times, when we discern what looks like an opposition to ideology, questions of autonomy and agency become crucial. These articles are characteristic of recent scholarship in that they seek to discover forms of resistance, sites where subjects attempt to use the means at their disposal for purposes of empowerment and transformation. These articles are also symptomatic of another recent critical development pertaining to the way class is mobilized analytically.

All of the essays in this issue take as an explicit or implicit starting point the class character of modern society. Yet in no case is class treated as foundational; class is not understood as necessarily autonomous from other registers of identity. Indeed, in these articles gender is revealed to be just as important as class in understanding how work interpellates subjects. In stressing issues of gender, these scholars pave the way for a more nuanced understanding of work and subjectivity than is enabled by an orthodox Marxist approach. Rather than privileging one identity category, scholars are increasingly finding it necessary to recognize social identity as signified through a

variety of registers—registers such as race, gender, sexuality, and nationality, as well as class—which make sense only in relation to each other. In order to grasp the specificity of a subject's position in a given historical context, it becomes crucial to investigate the complex ways these registers of identity are mutually determining. Registers of identity thus function together—if often asymmetrically—to position a subject within hierarchies of power. To use a spatial metaphor, we might see identity as operating within and across a matrix, a dense web, or a multidimensional grid; to note that the registers constituting identity are interconnected and interdependent does not, however, deny that in a given context, one or more registers of identity might be more prominent than the others.

As we enter a new millennium, at a moment when the global proliferation of the market seems to signal the final triumph of capitalism, we must recognize that the story is not over. History has not ended. Despite the shortcomings of many attempted alternatives to capitalism, Marx's central insights about the insidious and deeply destructive nature of capitalism continue to be persuasive. Above all, the essays collected in this issue indicate that the task of interrogating capitalism and its attendant ideologies is once again emerging as an urgent project. If as part of this project class can no longer be treated as an entirely sufficient concept, class nonetheless serves—and will continue to serve—as a crucially useful category of analysis.

Works Cited

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