

Learning to labour unequally: understanding the relationship between cultural production, cultural consumption and inequality

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ABSTRACT

Inequality has become essential to understanding contemporary society and is at the forefront of media, political and practice discussions of the future of the arts, particularly in the UK. Whilst there is a wealth of work on traditional areas of inequality, such as those associated with income or gender, the relationship between culture, specifically cultural value, and inequality is comparatively under-researched.

The article considers inequality and cultural value from two points of view: how cultural value is consumed and how it is produced. The paper argues that these two activities are absolutely essential to understanding the relationship between culture and social inequality, but that the two activities have traditionally been considered separately in both academic research and public policy, despite the importance of culture to British and thus international policy agendas. The article uses the example of higher education in the UK to think through the relationship between cultural consumption and production. In doing, so the article maps out a productive possibility for a new research agenda, by sketching where and how research might link cultural consumption and production to better understand inequality.

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Introduction

Inequality is one of the defining political issues of our times, so great a global problem that elites themselves have allegedly become concerned. Hanauer (2014) may have been a little premature, at least at time of writing, in warning his fellow 'zillionaires' that people with pitchforks were coming to get them, but his point that inequality is at historically high levels and is possibly socially unsustainable is surely correct.

The aim of this paper is to consider inequality in cultural consumption and production, two areas of research which are very active, in both scholarly and in policy communities at the moment (see O'Brien & Oakley, 2015 for a summary), but which are rarely considered together. By thinking through the relationship between cultural consumption and production, with specific reference to higher education, the article maps out a productive possibility for a new research agenda.

Addressing inequalities in cultural consumption, the tendency of cultural consumption to be affected by differences not only in class and levels of education, but also gender, ethnicity, age and crucially, spatially, has long been a concern of cultural policymakers, though research continues to suggest that public policy is failing to address these disparities (Gordon, Powell, & Stark, 2013).

Inequality in production, at least in terms of professional production, which is what this paper is more concerned with, has historically received less attention, as indeed questions of cultural labour have generally been marginal in policy terms (Banks & Hesmondhalgh, 2009). But the last few years have witnessed an unprecedented media and policy interest in questions of representation and inequality in cultural production, just as they have witnessed a growth in work on cultural labour in general (Banks, Gill, & Taylor, 2013). What has long been apparent to scholars in the field – that the cultural industries workforce is less ethnically diverse, more male and skewed towards those of a higher socio-economic background than most other sectors of the economy – is being increasingly recognised by the media, policymakers and wider commentariat.

The paper focuses on the UK for three reasons, all of which have important parallels with, and potential lessons for, other national contexts.

In the first instance the UK has exported its model for governing culture to various Commonwealth nations, including Canada and Australia, in the form of Arts Councils and arms length funding arrangements. This can be seen as a contrast to the continental European dirigiste system and the United States' more laissez-faire approach. Moreover the UK has, in the form of creative industries, developed a globally influential blueprint for how the economic conception of culture, grounded in a view of how culture as the production and control of intellectual property should function. The creative industries, in various forms, have been adopted almost globally (with the USA as the major notable exception) as a lens through which to view national cultural policies and activities (Ross, 2007). As a result, insights into the inequalities within circuits of culture (DuGay et al., 1996) prevailing in the UK can offer important insights more globally.

Secondly, the British case is instructive because of the position accorded to culture within economic policy, which is at once central and at the same time peripheral. The UK has organised its economy to focus on a variety of services sector occupations, notably in the financial sector (Englen et al., 2011). Within this reorganisation, successive governments have stressed the importance of various forms of cultural activity, originally conceived of as creative industries, intertwined with conceptions of the information, knowledge and digital economies. The narration of culture's importance to the service economy means a focus on culture's role in replicating economic forms of inequality is given greater importance given the economic function of culture in the UK (O'Brien, 2015a, 2015b).

Finally, as this article goes on to outline, the multiple disciplinary traditions exploring the role of culture in the replication of social inequality in the UK offer a rich literature to form the basis of analysis and thus both a research and potential policy agenda. It is to this work that the article now turns.

The rise of interest in culture and inequality

Despite the renewed saliency of these issues, the possible links between inequalities in cultural consumption and the make-up of the labour force remain under-explored in the

academic literature, though this has not prevented journalists and cultural commentators from speculating. In the UK, the prominence of public school (privately educated, or 'posh') actors and singers in particular has caused something of a media furore, often provoked by older artists who themselves came from working or lower middle class backgrounds. Journalist and radio presenter Stuart Maconie mourns the 'creeping blandness,' of much indie music, as (white) popular music features a large influx of the privately educated from Chris Martin of Coldplay, Florence Welch, Mumford and Sons to Lily Allen, replacing what he saw as the 'grittiness' and 'conflict' to which the best popular music gives expression (Maconie, 2015). Maconie's observation that, 'Most modern indie bands' lyrics seem to be either turgid chunks of half-digested philosophy or indulgent disquisitions on the singer's fragile emotional microclimate,' chimes with Time journalist Daniel D'Addario's comment on the Academy Award shortlist that 'seven of the eight Best Picture nominees are about a white man dealing with internal conflict' (D'Addario, 2015). Similarly, UK screenwriter Jimmy McGovern, best known for undeniably 'gritty' portrayals of life such as 'Cracker'¹ or 'The Street'² voiced the concern that it was getting harder to make TV dramas about working class life in the UK, as he could no longer find actors who can convincingly portray working-class characters. 'They're getting fewer and fewer because it's only the posh ones who can afford to go into acting,' he commented in an interview with *The Guardian* newspaper (Rawlinson, 2015).

Such discourse is undeniably problematic. A focus on one's internal life is hardly an illegitimate subject for cultural exploration whatever one's background, and actors are presumably supposed to be able to act the role of characters from different social milieu. A sort of class essentialism hangs over the argument that all working class life is 'gritty,' while the belief that pop music used to be better in the past is an unproven, if persistent, view. But, however problematically, at least such arguments attempt to get at one of the primary reasons often given for paying attention to the question of inequality in cultural production: that cultural products matter because they shape how we understand ourselves and our society and thus the question of who gets to make cultural products is a profoundly relevant one.

While there is a wealth of analysis on representation and cultural production, particularly in terms of gender and ethnicity (e.g. Banks & Steimer, 2015; Bourne, 2001; Conon, 2015; Malik, 2002; Rollock, 2014; Rollock, Gilborn, Vincent, & Ball, 2015; Saha, 2015), there is less material on social class and particularly a dearth of material that links social class, cultural consumption and exclusion from professional labour markets. That is the subject of this paper. We argue that looking at both production and consumption is absolutely essential to understanding the relationship between cultural and social inequality and that it is not sufficient to simply interrogate these activities alongside each other, but that we need to think about the ways in which these phenomena are linked.

In so doing, we understand inequality as concerning questions of legitimacy and respect as much as it does the distribution of material and social resources. Work on the *experience* of class inequality such as disgust, stigma, devaluation and disrespect has flourished recently alongside more conventional class analysis of unequal access to power and resources (Sayer, 2002; Tyler, 2008). But this has not yet begun to penetrate the policy discourse which, when it acknowledges these issues, tends to focus on purely economic exclusion (O'Brien & Oakley, 2015).

The role of culture within society's system's of worth and valuation is manifold. It is not simply that individuals lacking the right sort of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) may be marginalised, but also that the output of the cultural industries themselves is part of how we understand class and status. The workforce of these industries, the 'creative class' (Florida, 2002) celebrated by policymakers and depicted as key to economic growth in both developed and developing economies (UNCTAD, 2010) is seen to be endowed with particular characteristics – flexibility, adaptability, creativity and even 'tolerance' – which are themselves often the product of social stratification. To be lacking in these qualities is to be designated as not having value or worth in a society in which as Lamont (2012, p. 211) put it, 'definitions of worth that are not based on market performance tend to lose their relevance where market fundamentalism is exercising strong homogenizing pressures on collective identities and on shared definitions of what defines a worthy life.'

The next section briefly summarises some of the main literature on culture and inequality, before going on to outline our arguments about the links between them. We look in particular at the role of higher education with its penumbra of internships, work experience and industry-relevant degrees and at the characteristics of cultural labour markets which replicate these inequalities. The paper concludes with a discussion of the future research needs and possibilities that this analysis suggests.

Inequality and cultural consumption

Almost all research agrees that cultural consumption is socially differentiated and there are differences along lines of class and social status, educational level, age, gender, ethnicity and disability. As a recent policy-oriented report in the UK makes clear, 'The wealthiest, better educated and least ethnically diverse 8% of the population forms the most culturally active segment of all' (Warwick Commission, 2015, p. 33).

Our concern in this paper is primarily with class based inequalities, though this is not to deny the importance of other forms of inequality nor indeed of the intersections between them. Indeed, given the importance of intersectionality as an idea within feminist literature (Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Lorde, 1984), work on the intersection between class and gender has been particularly fruitful. To give just one example, Loveday's work on the experience of working class students in higher education (2015), suggests that female students are more likely than male ones to fear being recognised as working class and judged negatively because of this, which in turn leads to feeling of worthlessness and even shame. However, we concur with Sayer's argument (2005) that it is both important and legitimate to focus explicitly on social class when we are trying to understand the role of that social category in the reproduction of social inequality.

As the major study of British cultural consumption points out,

Class remains a central factor in the structuring of contemporary cultural practice in Britain: class matters. Whatever social advantage might arise from heavy engagement in cultural activities will accrue to those who are highly educated, who occupy higher occupational class positions, and who have backgrounds within higher social classes. (Bennett et al., 2009, p. 52)

There are conflicts in the debate around inequality and cultural consumption in the UK. Partially this is to do with a technical debate between Weberian sociologists interested

in social status (Chan & Goldthorpe, 2007; Reeves, 2014) and Bourdieusian sociologists interested in social class. But more important are the ways in which these differences in consumption patterns are linked to notions of value or worth, in other words what is regarded as 'good' cultural consumption (the right type, the right amount) and, moreover, the role of public policy in supporting this 'approved' consumption.

There are two ideas that need to be borne in mind here, first the concept of a 'deficit' model, and secondly the idea of omnivorous cultural consumption. In policy terms, the idea of a deficit model is a critique of public interventions which start from the premise that people not attending cinema, theatre, museums or other forms of formal cultural provision are somehow missing out, and which consistently under-values everyday forms of cultural activity, such as volunteer or amateur arts, listening to the radio or watching TV. Bull (2015), writing on classical music, notes how the policy-led concern with getting people to attend or participate in elite cultural forms affirms the lesser worth of the cultures with which those groups are already engaged (see Dawson, 2012 on museums for similar concerns).

The idea that not engaging in formal cultural activity is a problem relates to the change in society that has seen cultural engagement become a marker of a particular kind of 'normality'. An illustration of this new normal comes in the figure of the omnivore. In this case, higher status results from the ability to range widely in one's cultural consumption patterns, to show an easy familiarity with both 'popular' and 'high' culture, and crucially to know what sorts of popular culture to espouse.

The idea of there being a single, unified, 'legitimate' culture is no longer an acceptable element of the way contemporary society perceives itself (Warde, Wright, & Gayo-Cal, 2007). Even within social elites, consumption of only 'high' cultural forms is a minority pursuit and broadsheet newspapers devote as much time to discussing reality TV shows or popular music as they do to reviewing classical music or contemporary art exhibitions. In policy terms, distinctions remain, and while film for example has achieved the status of an art form worthy of public support, videogames have not, at least outside of 'economic development' initiatives. Moreover it is still generally assumed that popular culture can be safely left to the market, while high culture needs to be protected from its ravages (Oakley, 2014). But in the broader social context, distinctions now tend to take place *within* categories of cultural production rather than between them.

This is particularly true for younger generations (Roose, 2014). For example, in comedy younger participants see comedy as a legitimate cultural form, in contrast to its status as a popular or lowbrow cultural activity for older generations (Friedman, 2014). Yet there were clear displays of taste hierarchies within comedy, which were used to make judgments about what sort of people like the 'wrong' sort of comedy. Sociological considerations of class boundaries illustrate how this new normal operates. As Skeggs (2004, p. 148) has noted, a shift has occurred from, 'middle class formation reliant on achieving status through hiding and restricting knowledge to one in which status is achieved through the display of this knowledge and practice: exclusivity to transparency'.

It is here that ideas about the breadth and depth of cultural knowledge, crossing the boundaries of previous eras' cultural hierarchies, are important and consumption patterns map on to wider status issues. Contemporary cultural divisions separate those who possess cultural capital from those who lack it by the former's inclination towards the 'new' and their 'cosmopolitan' tastes (Prieur & Savage, 2013), or as Wright (2005, p. 111)

succinctly puts it, 'Having a wide range of cultural interests is a form of, rather than an end to, processes of social distinction.' As we shall see these orientations are precisely those which higher education systems, particularly in the arts, regard as valuable.

Natural talent?

One of the primary domains for linking cultural consumption and production is the higher education system, a primacy which seems to be strengthening given its general expansion in most developed economies and its importance as a conduit into professional cultural work. Recent data makes this clear: 78% of the UK media industries workforce hold an undergraduate degree, more than twice the percentage for the overall working age population, with over a quarter having a post-graduate qualification and over half holding a degree in a 'creative or media' subject (Creative Skillset, 2015).

There are now more graduates with 'creative or media degrees' than ever before and more of them working in the cultural sectors. Policy rhetoric continues to talk up the value of the creative industries and the systems of academic and vocational education that are imagined to serve them and alongside that, the expansion of higher education is routinely presented as an equalising measure. However, despite an overall expansion in the undergraduate population, sharp stratification remains. While higher education is often seen as a field that has the potential to confer value through the accrual of different forms of capital, participation does not guarantee this (Loveday, 2015). Perceptions and fears can determine the type of institution students apply to or attend, and non-traditional students often experience feelings of being a 'fish out of water' within higher education itself, where middle-class norms and values are routinely privileged. There is clearly clustering of students from more privileged backgrounds within elite institutions (Comunian, Faggian, & Li, 2010) and retention figures are also higher for students from more advantaged backgrounds. According to the public agency charged with monitoring 'fair access,' 'the most advantaged 20% of young people were 2.5 times more likely to go to higher education . . . than the most disadvantaged 40%,' (OFFA, 2014, p. 2).

The role of higher education in linking cultural and social inequality is to say the least, complex. It results not only from crude economic measures – raising student tuition fees to amongst the highest in the world as the UK has done is unlikely to aid the cause of equality – but this is far from being the full story. The processes of admission to higher education, the role of extra curricula activity, the links between this and 'work experience' in which universities play an increasingly active role, and the development of social networks, all ensure that higher education continues to structure unequal relationships well beyond its own door and into the workplace.

In the UK, the admissions process has been an important focus for research. Admission and the stage immediately before that are a critical factor (Burke & McManus, 2009). Knowledge about where to apply, how to apply and what is required is highly unequally distributed and prospective students from families not familiar with these processes may rely on websites and prospectuses rather than being apply to rely on the, 'soft information,' about what to say and what to stress in an application that is more likely be to be available to those with family or other connections who have been through such processes.

As Zimdars, Sullivan, and Heath (2009, p. 649) write in their study of admissions to Oxford University, 'the questions of what counts as ability, how we determine whether someone is "able" or not, and what resources are needed to cultivate a particular ideal of ability,' are crucial questions which are often overlooked in discussions of equity in higher education. Interview-based systems, such as those for undergraduate admission to Oxford, are in theory designed to get beyond mere paper qualifications and to provide institutions with a better guide to potential 'talent.' But the importance of cultural capital and indeed the 'right sort' of cultural capital in such situations is attested to by a variety of studies (Burke & McManus, 2009; Hayton, Haste, & Jones, 2014; Zimdars et al., 2009). Displaying a wider familiarity with the cultural world – separate from that which one might have learned at school – was a strong predictor of success particularly for admission to arts subjects at Oxford, as Zimdars *et al.* found out. And thus the children of the professional middle class (as distinct from the managerial class in this respect as Bourdieu noted) tend to do particularly well in securing admission.

That Oxford's admission procedures are marked by social class in perhaps not surprising, but such processes are clearly at work at other institutions, including those of the art school. As Hayton et al. (2014) note in their study of undergraduate admissions to Goldsmiths Fine Art³ undergraduate degree, art schools and departments are supposed to be the home of the maverick outsider. Like Oxford, admission to Fine Art at Goldsmiths is not by exam results alone, but by presenting a portfolio of independent work and interview. In this case, it is not knowledge of the dominant culture that is being sought out, but ability to critique it, with all the familiarity with the artistic 'canon' that this implies. In keeping with the institution's self-image, the applicant's ability to question the 'status quo' of the art world was one of the unspoken criteria for acceptance. The omnivorous subject, favouring the new and the emergent is what is being sought out here, a reflection of the way that education systems are increasingly legitimating cosmopolitanism as form of cultural capital, largely ignoring the social structuring of its acquisition (Igarashi & Saito, 2014). Traditional hierarchies are not necessarily what are being replicated here; instead the ideal subject is able to deploy flexibility and adaptability, the attributes allegedly needed to thrive in a globalised economy. The expectations of admissions tutors at a variety of art and design colleges in the UK are enmeshed with a certain type of applicant subject (Burke & McManus, 2009). Not planning to live away from home for example, a practice more common for middle class than for working class students, was in one case described as an example of 'immaturity,' on the part of the applicant, which suggests both an inability to understand the economic factors that may influence this, as well as a judgement about the kind of person who may find ties to home and family to be more important than mobility (Allen & Hollingworth, 2013).

Construction of the 'ideal candidate' for the cultural industries continues throughout higher education, a system which is now far more engaged in questions of 'employability' than was traditionally the case (Ashton & Noonan, 2013). Undergraduates increasingly believe that getting a degree will not be enough and they are encouraged, via a variety of extra-curricula activities from volunteering to global travel to working in 'industry,' to develop additional skills and attributes. Such processes are again marked by inequality, not only in terms of access to them (the ability to travel widely for example is somewhat unequally shared) but also in the ways in which these experiences may be mobilised as capital.

Students from different social backgrounds differ not only in their engagement in such processes, but in their 'capacity and orientation towards mobilising additional experience into valuable capitals in the transition to the labour market' (Bathmaker, Ingram, & Waller, 2013, p. 726). Self-cultivation is a life-long process of 'playing the game', beginning with the bewildering variety of extra school activities undertaken by some middle class children in childhood, an undertaking used to develop competitive advantage for the labour market (Bathmaker et al., 2013). In contrast to engagement in work experience or internship programmes, which was generally more consciously strategic, they found that middle class students tended to engage in extra curricula leisure activities for a greater variety of reasons, but even in these cases showed greater knowledge of what would 'play well' in later life when presenting the sort of 'rounded personality' that employers are said to embrace. Similarly, a variety of working experiences, including what might seem like casual work, tended to be accrued along the way. As one middle class interviewee put it, 'I've done so many activities when I was little it's just stupid . . . my sister's now working all round the world doing windsurf teaching and stuff like this, and I've taught break dancing and stuff like that' (quoted in, Bathmaker et al., 2013, p. 733).

In the cultural industries, such 'portfolio' working is a common experience for which such activities might be viewed as good preparation. Working class students by contrast, tended to place greater faith in 'getting a good degree' often abjuring extra curricula activities, either leisure or work experience related, in the misguided belief that this would ensure better employability prospects.

The growth in the number of creative and media degree courses has been paralleled by an increase in work-related learning in its various forms: student work placements, internships, incubation, and knowledge exchange programmes have all multiplied. In part this reflects the fact that some sectors of the cultural industries display a suspicion of vocational qualifications and a preference for experiential learning, the construction of a particular sort of self-identity that higher education increasingly seeks to satisfy.

The growth in internships, however, has attracted particular attention (Cabinet Office, 2012; Leonard & Bruce, 2014; Perlin, 2012). Even in policy circles where problems of cultural labour are rarely acknowledged, unpaid internships have been identified as a problem that needs to be combated (Oakley, 2013a). Yet a complex mix of political motivations, career ambitions and lifestyle aspirations allows people to rationalise their own involvements in internship schemes, and this interacts in important ways with social class (Leonard & Bruce, 2014).

Leonard *et al.*'s work, though not on the cultural industries specifically, is germane in part because it looks at graduate interns in 'third sector' charitable organisations, a sector where, as in the cultural industries, non-financial rewards are often stressed and motivations including the political and the ethical, sit alongside professional career aspirations. Corresponding to what Oakley (2009) found in research on fine art graduates, working unpaid in the third sector was justified by those undertaking internships because of the nature of the organisation involved. Interviewees admitted that they would not necessarily work unpaid in other sorts of organisations, but the ethical status of the third sector could be used to justify what are in fact exploitative working practices. The consequences of this for the social make-up of the workforce was acknowledged by some interviewees including those from middle class backgrounds who recognised the privileges that enabled them to undertake unpaid internships, but it was generally justified

either by arguing that these organisations could not manage without unpaid workers, a claim also made about a variety of cultural organisations particularly in the arts, or that the social good produced by such organisations outweighed any harm. Commitments to a variety of liberal or leftist political positions thus sits alongside an unwillingness to talk about politics of the workplace, a common occurrence in the cultural industries (Oakley, 2013b).

The direct involvement of higher education institutions in unpaid work in the cultural industries is generally via work placements, often undertaken for credits. The stated aim of these schemes is often ameliorative; to try and supplement the role of social networks, with their obvious biases, and enable students from working class or ethnic minority backgrounds to gain work in the cultural sectors. Allen et al.'s work looks specifically at the effect of work placements and reveals that such schemes often founder in their stated attempts to promote diversity of ethnicity, gender, class or disability (Allen, Quinn, Hollingworth, & Rose, 2012; Allen, 2014). Rather than simply easing the transition into the labour market, the processes of valuation and evaluation that privilege middle class norms (having contacts and the confidence to exploit them generally won praise from university staff) alongside a general reluctance to acknowledge problems of inequality, both within host institutions and universities. When it came to discussing work placements, Allen *et al.* found that higher education institutions did little to help students identify, or even discuss, issues of inequality. Individuals were encouraged to 'fit in' and not complain when they experienced feelings of exclusion. And the rhetoric of openness and meritocracy is stubbornly adhered to; anyone who cannot succeed in such situations is viewed as unfit to enter the industries. 'Paying your dues', demonstrating your commitment, mastering the attitudes and codes of behaviour that such jobs are said to require, are all ways in which these industries seek to maintain its image as diverse and open, while operating exclusionary recruitment and retention practices.

Fitting in – exclusions and inequalities in the cultural workforce

Before going in to discuss the characteristics of cultural labour markets, it is worth outlining what current research suggests about the class make-up of the cultural workforce in the UK. In terms of publicly available data sets, the biggest gap relates to social class. This is partly because there is no legal requirement to collect data on class⁴ and partly because of the difficulty of so doing. A variety of proxies are generally used to indicate class background including coming from a background where parents attended higher education or being privately educated. In both cases the cultural industries workforce shows a social skew, some 44% come from families where parents are degree-level educated, while 14% were privately educated, double the national average of 7% (Creative Skillset, 2015). In senior management roles almost a quarter of people were privately educated, which again suggests that such a background is useful not only in terms of 'getting in' but also of 'getting on' (Randle & Culkin, 2009).

Prevailing explanations for the dominance of the middle and upper middle classes in the cultural and creative industries tends to focus on economic factors: the necessity to undertake unpaid work in particular. This is clearly an issue. The ability of parents to support their children not only through higher education but beyond into internships, the likelihood of having friends or relatives in expensive parts of the country with

whom one can lodge (in large enough houses) without paying rent, the ability to borrow small amounts of funds (the popular media phrase 'the bank of mum and dad' is full of such class-based assumptions) and so on all, have a clear impact on the ability of working class people to enter the cultural professions.

Wider social networks matter as well, not simply in terms of nepotism, but in offering everything from advice, to internships and placements, to role models. Knowing people who already work in the cultural and creative industries offers a multitude of advantages that help ensure that the narrow class basis of the sectors is replicated inter-generationally (Nelligan, 2015). Recent policy research (Creative Skillset, 2015) suggests that 48% of the media industries workforce have done unpaid work at some point in their career, up from 43% in 2010 and over half (56%) found out about their current or most recent role through informal recruitment methods, personal and social networks.

Unpaid work acts as a major barrier to potential working class entrants, while 'getting on' in these industries requires access to relevant social networks and the confidence to exploit them. Some recent work on actors (Friedman, O'Brien, & Laurison, [forthcoming](#)), suggests not only the striking underrepresentation of actors from working-class backgrounds, but also that these actors are less likely to accumulate the same economic, cultural and social capital as those from privileged backgrounds, resulting in those from professional or managerial backgrounds, upper and middle class, having incomes on average over £11,000 higher than actors from intermediate or routine/semi routine, working class, backgrounds.

But again, economic exclusion, particularly via unpaid labour, is simply part of the picture of stratification in cultural labour. Working patterns, which Pratt terms as 'bulimic' (2000) and the structure of the industry – with high levels of self-employment – clearly favour those younger, without caring responsibilities and able-bodied. Video-game development, for example, exhibits a 'forced workaholism' (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009) with the divisions of labour based on age, gender and parenthood. The young, male image of the games industry workforce being reinforced in this case by the difficulty anyone with any caring responsibilities would have in maintaining the level of commitment and working hours required. Similarly, new media freelancers, in particular, work extremely long hours per week and the lack of pension, insurance and paid holidays means that many fear becoming older or regard having children as something that they would not be able to combine with their working lives (Gill, 2002).

The celebration of the possibilities of self-directed creative work reached its apotheosis in Richard Florida's *Rise of the Creative Class* (Florida, 2002), a work now as famous for the multiple critiques it has spawned as it is in its own right. The essence of Florida's argument was that the ways of working associated with cultural work have moved from the margins to the economic mainstream. By 'ways of working,' however, Florida did not mean low pay, insecurity or casualisation, but rather autonomy over working time and place, dressing in relaxed or casual clothing and working in a stimulating environment with others of the same ilk. The 'creative class,' 'hipsters,' 'neo-bohemians,' even 'slashies' (so called because they hold multiple job titles simultaneously) and so on have spawned a large literature of their own, one where critique is sometimes in danger of being appropriated as a lifestyle guide (Duffy, 2015; Gill, 2002; Lloyd, 2006; McRobbie, 2002). Yet, while the notion of a creative 'class' has been widely derided, Florida's casual use of the term did point to another set of exclusionary mechanisms beyond the merely economic. In his study of the

changing nature of the Wicker Park area of Chicago, Richard Lloyd (2006) shows how many young creatives subsidise their unpaid artistic work through a variety of service sector jobs particularly in bars and restaurants. He argues that the 'performative' nature of cultural work often serves workers well in service industries which require, 'the mastery of hip social codes' (2006, p. 181).

The mastery of such codes is classed, as Lloyd is well aware, and he notes that although genuine material scarcity is not uncommon in this group of workers, the 'voluntary' adoption of this material scarcity differentiates it sharply from the life of the genuinely poor – both in terms of social status, which is often quite high, and in terms of control over one's life.

The pleasure, psychic income or self-realisation that cultural workers are said to find in their work often results in the blurring of boundaries between 'work and 'life'; another feature of the cultural labour market which can be seen to be becoming widespread outside of the cultural industries. The offices, particularly of media companies both old and new make room for 'play,' whether with chill-out areas, pool tables, gyms or even in-house masseurs. This self-image of the cultural industries as fun or glamorous is consciously embraced by cultural workers themselves. In the advertising industry many employees were drawn to this sector of the economy in part because of its fun image, which not only means fun at work but also a culture of post-work drinking and partying (Nixon & Crewe, 2004)

The 'compulsory' elements of this post-work drinking, are, if anything, even stronger for those without regular employment as it is in these social settings after work that freelancers find out about upcoming contacts, new projects and so on. Some of this activity is undoubtedly about pleasure and socialisation, particularly for those for whom the working day might be quite solitary, while there is also a compulsory element, where one can never switch off, relax or get away from work. As Banks points out, a paradox of this life/work blurring is that while the image of cultural work itself is non-routine, unregulated and 'creative,' the need to be successfully 'social' in the correct way is in fact rather strongly enforced (Banks, 2007). As he notes, just as Florida is dismissive of 'blue-collar' leisure activities such as watching TV or being a sports spectator, his celebration of the choices and habits of his creative class is largely a celebration of the 'new' middle class – omnivorous, cosmopolitan and free from ties to place or tradition.

Conclusion

This article has argued that academic work needs to address the current media and social obsession over the relationship between culture and inequality. It has done this by sketching out how culture is related to inequality, by thinking through the often separated realms of cultural production and cultural consumption.

The result of this separation is that at present there is no body of literature, as this discussion has illustrated, which sufficiently addresses the causal connection between *who* works in the production of culture, *what* cultural forms this labour force produces, *how* the consumption of these forms are stratified and *what* difference this makes to the replication, reinforcement or reduction of social inequality. For sure, individual projects have tackled these questions, but the field still awaits its definitive intervention to account

for the role of culture in the reproduction of social inequality. The paper, by thinking through the relationship of cultural consumption to entrance into higher education and thereby on into cultural production, has demonstrated both the need and the potential of this perspective. In particular, by drawing on a range of literature from across the diverse disciplines studying life within cultural *production*, we have aimed to demonstrate the importance of cultural *consumption*, as a structuring factor, both via education and then within the labour force itself.

Moreover, there is a pressing need to address consumption and production together for the purposes of policy making. In the United States there have been moves in this direction with the National Endowment for the Arts' *How Art Works* (2012) report and associated funding stream. This work aims to connect a range of academic, consultant, organisational and government work on the arts, ranging from the social psychology of audience choices, through educational and health benefits, to questions of the meaning of creativity. However, the central thrust of the work, notwithstanding the importance of understanding America's cultural system for policy purposes, is to justify a range of public investments into infrastructure, beyond a merely economic market failure narrative.

The NEA admit that the benefits of the arts are not equally distributed across individuals and communities and their research agenda does seek a theoretical basis for their conception of the arts' role in society. Notwithstanding these points, inequality is absent from their discourse. Seeking to narrate the arts, and thus culture more broadly, through the lens of a positive impact or a 'cultural' value (O'Brien & Oakley, 2015) inevitably occludes questions of the *negative* impacts of the arts. Indeed this narration misrepresents the functional role, driven both by consumption and production, that culture plays in reproducing inequality. It is this role that has been the focus of this article.

Whilst the NEA, as a comparatively less influential policy making organisation when viewed in light of both British and European cultural systems, offers a limited attempt to grapple with cultural consumption and production together, absent of inequality, there is little from the nation that has been the focus of the preceding discussion. The example of the UK, whose cultural policy has been influential across various national contexts in setting the agenda for the economic function of cultural production and consumption, is especially problematic. British government, across economic, cultural and social policy departments, took seriously the utopianism of much of cultural and creative industries discourse. Culture was supposed to deal with the de-industrialisation of the British economy, intervene directly into social problems, as well as producing cultural goods for consumption both at home and abroad. As this article has argued, culture has not fulfilled the desires of those in policy. However, this is fundamentally as governmental power did little to understand the social basis for culture, the *who*, *what* and *how* questions alluded to in this conclusion. Given the international popularity of the British model of cultural policy making, without the intervention of an academic research agenda to address the *who*, *what* and *how* questions, it will continue to be the case that government, in whatever form, may be attentive to individual elements of culture's impact on inequality, without ever grasping the nettle of intervention, regulation or policy making necessary to either reduce or promote the role of culture.

Notes

1. A UK crime drama serial about the work of a fictional criminal psychologist played by Robbie Coltrane, which ran from 1993–1995.
2. A TV drama series about the residents of fictional street in Manchester, UK, which was broadcast on the BBC from 2006–2009.
3. A liberal arts college based in London, which has played a central role in the UK's musical and visual culture.
4. The 2010 Equality Act defines nine 'protected' characteristics (age, race, gender reassignment, disability, marital status, pregnancy and maternity, religious belief, gender and sexual orientation), but not social class.

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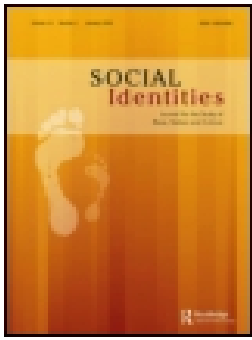
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Learning to labour unequally: understanding the relationship between cultural production, cultural consumption and inequality

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