

LABORING UNDER THE SIGN OF THE NEW

Cultural Studies, Organizational Communication,
and the Fallacy of the New Economy

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Postmodernist academics and contemporary business gurus are agreed on one thing: Capitalism has entered “new times” (Hall & Jacques, 1989), a “new economy” (Kelly, 1999), or the “information age” (Melucci, 1996). Therefore, we need “new social movements” (Laraña, Johnston, & Gusfield, 1994) that focus on “questions of cultural identity” (Hall & du Gay, 1996). These labels suggest that we live in a new social world, marked by an end to traditional class antagonisms and the irrelevance of mass labor organizing to win material gains for laborers in an era of global, flexible capitalism. Sometimes, it seems that in the world of contemporary social theory, there are no more sweatshops. No matter that Disney workers sewing t-shirts and other merchandise in Haiti earn 28 cents an hour, whereas Disney CEO Michael Eisner made nearly 6 hundred million dollars in 1998, 451,000 times the wage of the workers under his employ (Roesch, 1999).

But in academic descriptions of the new economy, there are hardly any industrial workers at all. Apparently, the assembly line is a thing of the past; these days everyone telecommutes, conjuring material goods such as computers and athletic shoes out of virtual space. Capitalism has taken on new shape, and the old models of struggle in the workplace, such as organizing a union and striking, are no longer relevant. However, workers may take heart in some

pro forma voice in the workplace and find consolation in the rituals of everyday life, shopping, television—all of the avenues of consumption that allow us to negotiate the production of our subjectivities.

Is this picture of scholarship about globalization, labor, and culture exaggerated? Perhaps. Even so, our field of communication studies is substantially marked by a nearly exclusive emphasis on culture that risks ignoring what is still the most fundamental feature of workplace social relations and communication: a powerful class antagonism between workers and employers. To be sure, there is a growing literature in critical organizational studies that attends to the voices of workers (for reviews, see Cheney, 1995, 1999; Cheney et al., 1998; Conrad & Poole, 1997; Deetz & Mumby, 1990; Mumby, 1993). A few cultural studies scholars have attended to issues of class and labor (see Aronowitz, 1989, 1992; Munt, 2000). And yes, there are a few rhetorical studies that mention class or the labor movement (Aune, 1994; Burke, 1984; Carter, 1980; Cloud, 1994, 1999; Darsey, 1988; Jensen, 1977; Jensen & Jensen, 1977; Knapp & McCroskey, 1968; Tonn, 1996). On the whole, however, emphasis in this literature remains on voice, identity, and cultural microstrategies in the workplace rather than on labor's agency in winning material improvements in the lives of workers. Class becomes one identity among others (rather than being formulated as a fundamental shared interest that enables solidarity across difference). Further scholarly attention is focused not on how classes take material power but on how class as an identity is expressed in culture.

Therefore, although I agree with David Carlone and Bryan Taylor (1998) that organizational communication studies needs to expand its already-growing critical literature on power and context in the workplace, I am not so sure cultural studies is the place to nourish that concern. And although I agree, too, that cultural studies could use some production-oriented ballast to balance its emphasis on the pleasures, texts, and subject formations of consumption, I wonder whether critical organizational communication studies is the right place to find this counterweight. My doubts arise from my perception that cultural studies and critical organizational communication possess a common shortcoming, namely, misplaced faith

in the idea that we are living in new times that require new politics: a politics of the self (and deconstruction of the self), a politics of discourse, and a politics of small, symbolic raids on the meaning system, as opposed to the collective, instrumental, material, and occasionally revolutionary politics of labor. I believe a more traditional rhetorical occupation with the study of social movements, particularly labor, should inform scholars interested in understanding and transforming relations of power, both material and symbolic, in the workplace.

At the core of the issue is a debate across the humanities and social sciences with regard to whether we live in a new economy, an allegedly postmodern, information-driven historical moment in which, it is argued, organized mass movements are no longer effective in making material demands of system and structure (Melucci, 1996). In suggesting that global capitalism has so innovated its strategies that there is no alternative to its discipline, arguments proclaiming a new economy risk inaccuracy, pessimism, and conservatism (Cloud, in press). Although a thorough summary is beyond the scope of this article, there is a great deal of evidence against claims that capitalism has necessarily entered a new phase of extraordinary innovation, reach, and scope (Hirst & Thompson, 1999). Both class polarization (Mishel, Bernstein, & Schmitt, 2001) and the ideological and management strategies that contain class antagonism (Cloud, 1998; Parker & Slaughter, 1994) still resemble their prepostmodern counterparts.

Skeptical about new economy claims, economist Gordon Marshall (1997) pointed out, "In much of the industrialized world, the pattern of unequal social mobility chances has remained basically the same throughout most of the 20th century" (p. 5). He pulled together mountains of data to demonstrate that "social class remains an axial principle for the organization of social inequality" (p. 5). As I have noted in my recent book (Cloud, 1998), workplace therapeutics were invented at the turn of the 20th century and accelerated in application in response to the threat of labor unrest and the increasing pressures of industrial life on ordinary workers. The 1939 Hawthorne experiments (Mayo, 1960) were perhaps the pinnacle of such innovations, setting the precedent for today's "kinder,

gentler” managerial strategies. Furthermore, across most of the globe, Fordist models of production, including sweatshops and assembly lines, remain the norm in the production of commodities. Meanwhile, there has been a resurgence of the American labor movement since the mid-1990s (Greenwald, 1995), with the pilots’ strike at ComAir being only the most current example.

In addition, a number of scholars have noted that the “new times” hypothesis (Clarke, 1991; Nadesan, 2001 [this issue]) has resulted in a “retreat from class” (Wood, 1999) and a “descent into discourse” (Palmer, 1990). The cultural politics of survival and identity politics have replaced more instrumental hopes of social transformation. By *cultural politics of survival*, I refer to work describing and celebrating the defense of cultural identity in rituals and other cultural practices that “seize spaces for leisure, pleasure and recuperation” rather than “control over political and economic institutions” (Kelley, 1994, p. 181; see also Scott, 1992). In this light, it is interesting that the list of common topics to organizational and cultural studies compiled by Carlone and Taylor (1998) includes “identity, race and ethnicity, the body, ethics, narrative, technology, textuality, representation, gender, professional sports, globalization, hegemony, resistance, performance, space and place, and discourse genres” (p. 338) but not labor or class.

Perhaps this absence reflects an implicit consensus among communication scholars that “classes are dissolving” and “the most advanced societies are no longer class societies” (Pakulski & Waters, 1996, pp. 3-4). Many prominent scholars of social movements have argued for a focus on “new” identity and meaning-based social movements without regard to class, economic interests, or economic motivations or outcomes of movement activity (Maheu, 1995; Melucci, 1996). A corollary to such arguments is that class, like race, gender, and sexuality, is a social construction rather than an objective fact. For example, Aronowitz (1989; cited in Carlone & Taylor, 1998, p. 348) argued that class is a culturally produced performative category. From this viewpoint, the moment of political agency for ordinary people is not the moment of collective institutional transformation (which has been theorized out of the realm of possibility) but the moment of self-constitution and

interrogation of identities as they are produced and performed in discourse.

Alongside such popular arguments, a classical materialist approach to issues of labor may seem somewhat archaic. But as Lindsey German (1996) argued, we can understand class to be an objective relationship, having to do with whether one must work for a wage within the system in which goods are produced and distributed. My approach to the labor movement is fundamentally Gramscian. As Mumby (1997) noted, Gramsci's (1971/1934-1936) theory of hegemony describes not only the ways in which ruling interests in the state and economy organize an absorptive common sense; he also described the ways in which the working class (including all women, people of color, sexual minorities, and so forth who are not members of political and economic elites) can engage in political and cultural work to craft an oppositional bloc, which then can be mobilized against employers or (as demonstrated by the spring 2001 protest and strike wave in Serbia that brought down Slobodan Milosevic) the state itself. On this model, one can see hope for organizing ordinary people across cultural differences in terms of their shared interests. Yet academicians isolated from the resurgence of antiglobalization, labor, and prodemocracy social movements over the past several years may be tempted to settle for what seem to me to be meager cultural freedoms.

In cultural studies, a project that had its roots in working-class education on a Gramscian model, the turn away from class was warranted by significant attention to race and ethnicity as identities constituted in culture that could not be reduced to class, necessitating a new emphasis on culture in the work of Stuart Hall (e.g., 1996), for example. Robert McChesney (1996) aptly summarized the problem:

The socialist political project of cultural studies has receded in importance over the past two decades. . . . Two necessary measures to reassert the radical political project in cultural studies are that it develop a more systematic critique of capitalism and the market, and that it pay closer attention to actual movements for social change. (p. 2)

I concede the importance of attention to race and culture (see Cloud, 1999) and agree with anthropologist Ann Kingsolver (1996) that class is always articulated with race, gender, sexuality, nation, and other axes of self-definition. But too often, as Medhurst (2000) noted, class ends up as a casualty in the race for newer and more complex theories of power and culture in the workplace. I worry about how it is that a revolutionary project rooted in the working class has become a “cultural politics of difference, of the struggles around difference, of the production of new identities, of the appearance of new subjects on the political and cultural stage” (Hall, 1996, p. 24).

Examples of a cultural politics of difference can be found among the instances of cultural studies of workplace communication cited by Carlone and Taylor (1998). Here, the emphasis is on how workers, facing increasingly absorptive regimes of concertive control (Papa, Auwal, & Singhal, 1997), adopt what Kelley (1994) and Scott (1992) labeled *infrapolitical microstrategies*. Infrapolitics refers to strategies for cultural survival rather than instrumental macro-level social change. Examples might include drug use on the job or theft by employees at Disney, means of coping with their situation without fundamentally transforming it. I certainly would not fault someone who has to wear a Goofy costume day in and day out for getting high, nor would I condemn anyone who is overworked and underpaid for workplace theft. But, neither would I argue that such actions constitute resistance when increasingly we can see examples of collective, more materially effective forms of resistance (for example, the 1997 United Parcel Service strike and the 1999 World Trade Organization protests) that actually give some workers greater control over their compensation for and conditions of work.

Likewise, in organizational communication, research on voice and participation in the workplace (for reviews, see Cheney et al., 1998; Seibold & Shea, 2001) does not always ask whether managerial strategies stressing employee participation substitute an illusion of voice and participation for real workers' control over wages, benefits, work hours, profits, and work conditions. As Deetz and

Kersten (1983) noted, such forms of employee participation are often “a tool for handling dissatisfaction, absenteeism, and alienation” (p. 169). Often, for example, employers introduce new participation programs even as the company is enacting layoffs, speed-ups, and “management by stress” (Parker & Slaughter, 1994). Although employee voice is important in this context, the economic clout of workers organized as a fighting union might be more so. This possibility, of increasing both voice and more tangible forms of workplace agency in and through union participation, is rarely mentioned in organizational communication literature.

For the three reasons I have sketched—the overwhelmingly and enduringly modern organization of production in our society, the objective reality of class interests and class-based instrumental agency, and the limits of cultural resistance as survival strategy—I am arguing that the concepts of materiality and class are still crucial for our critical, theoretical, and activist work, whether we align with cultural studies, critical organizational communication studies, both, or neither.

Lorell Patterson (1995) is a union member, a Black woman, and a veteran of a defeated labor struggle at Staley Manufacturing in Decatur, Illinois in 1994. In remarks delivered during that struggle, she made clear the continuing relevance of class and of the material nature of worker demands:

We’ve got to let them know we’re not going to take this anymore. We want education. We want livable wages. We want decent housing. And we want health care for the rest of our lives, not the life of a contract. It’s very simple—it shouldn’t be hard to understand. Every human being has a right to those basic essentials. The only way I can see that we’re going to get that is to start organizing and educating. We’ve got to start standing up and telling them no. I have a right to be treated as a human being. It’s time to start believing that we have the power. (p. 6)

To Patterson, a cultural politics of identity might assume secondary importance next to wages, health care, housing, and education. The voices of workers organizing for material improvements in their lives offer us this caution: Without attention to class interests, class

power, and class movement in a capitalist system that is ongoing, any attempt to understand power in the workplace will be, at best, incomplete and, at worst, irrelevant to the project of social change.

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