

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE CULTURAL ELITES: I JUST WORK HERE

Posts in this series

What Happened To The Cultural Elites: Changes In
The Conditions of Production

What Happened To The Cultural Elites: The
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What Happened To The Cultural Elites:
Entertainment Workers

Related Post

Symbolic Violence in Neoliberalism This post describes symbolic structures and cultural producers which I call symbolic workers.

The description of the cultural elites in this series is ugly: in a nutshell, they are so tangled up in the capitalist/market system that their intellectual autonomy and critical distance from authority is miniscule. In the related post linked above, I argued that it isn't necessary to assume that symbolic workers are acting in bad faith. After all, they merely reproduce the structures they inherited from their teachers.

Recently I had an extended discussion with my friend Gaius Publius who writes at *Down with Tyranny* and at *Naked Capitalism*, and I have changed my mind. My post started from an idea I found in David Swartz' book, *Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu*, that some of the structures that organize our understanding are denied structures, meaning that the people affected by them do not admit that they exist or that there is any other way to comprehend society. I argued that neoliberalism is a denied

structure. But just because people deny a structure doesn't mean that they do not see the results of their actions. In the case of symbolic workers, it's more likely that they see the negative effects they are creating and keep working anyway. The higher up in a field or organization people rise, the less likely it is that they don't see the results of their actions and theories. At the top of fields and organization, denial is not possible.

The capitalist system creates all sorts of justifications for the projects it approves. The most obvious is that the market knows what people really want. The sixth sequel to the Fast and Furious series is just giving people what they want. The daily local news survey of fires, car crashes and shootings is what people want. The cable news patriotic theme music and fiery chyrons blaring out the latest bombing of other countries and the loving shots of dead people being carried to ambulances after the latest shooting are just what people want. People need to know about the latest fire, and there's no need to explain why they need to know, or what could be done about it or which politicians and interest groups are stopping action because people don't want that. If they did the market would provide it.

Another justification is advertiser pressure that needs to be dealt with so that more important work can be done. Or they say it's a job, someone has to do it. It pays the rent and educates my kids which is at least true. Most fields of cultural production have some form of justification that relates to the field, as I show in the post about the economics field.

These justifications are out there waiting for symbolic workers who suddenly wonder if their work is contributing to the decay of communal society, if perhaps it's creating distrust and fear, or reinforcing ugly and stupid stereotypes, or is causing direct harm. If the symbolic worker doesn't look too closely, these justifications seem plausible. They are examples

of some of the ways the existing system enables people to pretend not to see the results of their actions.

Swartz says that Bourdieu refers to this as misrecognition.

Misrecognition is a key concept for Bourdieu; akin to the idea of “false consciousness” in the Marxist tradition, misrecognition denotes “denial” of the economic and political interests present in a set of practices. Symbolic practices, Bourdieu thus argues, deflect attention from the interested character of practices and thereby contribute to their enactment as disinterested pursuits.
P. 54.

I like the term “false consciousness” better. Misrecognition connotes a mistake which ignores the agency of the symbolic worker. False consciousness has an implication of intention, or at least of willful refusal to engage with the problem, as in contemporary use of the term denial.

Neoliberal economists can see the results of their theories. They advocated relentlessly for the abolition of most regulation on the grounds that the market would do a better job than the government. How could anyone make that argument in good faith after the Great Crash? But they don't stop. They wrecked the antitrust laws, which has led to ridiculous levels of concentration in almost every industry. Now some of them argue that monopoly is not a bad thing, or that there is no such thing because a new competitor will arise. They are currently arguing against wage hikes whether through minimum wage hikes or a job guarantee. They don't care about income or wealth inequality, which, they say, is the result of the markets in action.

In fact, it's not clear what impacts their views

have had that has any benefit for anyone but the rich few. With that record, which of them can plausibly claim not to be aware of their contribution to the sorry state of the personal finances of the 99%?

Another feature/bug is that day-to-day work keeps employees really busy, surrounds them with people who agree with them, and insulates them from critics. This is the defense Amy Chozick offers. Not once during the 1,226 days she covered Hillary Clinton did Chozick or her employers or editors ever stop to think about what their coverage looked like to an outsider. Even after the disgusting coverage of Whitewater and the other phony Clinton scandals that followed, they got played by the Republicans and in Chozick's telling, by the Russians.

Neither the neoliberal economists nor Chozick and her editors are innocents who misrecognize the results of their actions. They're guilty of false consciousness, deliberately refusing to look at the consequences of their actions in real time, when it matters. Accountability is a way to force symbolic workers to confront the results of their actions. Firing and shaming people who cause damage is a good thing. But there is no accountability. They feel no responsibility to society and are held to no standards. None of it affects them; they do not suffer the consequences of their actions.

They just work here.