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BOOK REVIEW

The Cultural Intermediaries Reader, by Jennifer Smith Maguire and Julian Matthews (eds.), London, Sage, 2014, 243 pp., ISBN 9781446201336

Reviewed by **Frederick H. Pitts**

This edited collection is a comprehensive treatment of Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural intermediaries. The first part introduces some conceptual and methodological foundations. Jennifer Smith Maguire outlines Bourdieu's theory; Toby Miller discusses cultural work and creative industries; Sean Nixon compares Bourdieu's approach with that of Michel Callon; and Liz McFall explores cultural intermediation as a process. The second part consists of empirical chapters exploring the concept's application in different contexts. These include Aidan Kelly on advertising, Caroline Hodges and Lee Edwards on PR, Victoria Durrer and Dave O'Brien on arts promotion, Charles Fairchild on music, and Lynne Pettinger on clothing retail.

Bourdieu's cultural intermediaries are members of a "new petite bourgeoisie". They work in "occupations involving presentation and representation" and "institutions providing symbolic goods and services" (1984, p. 359). Some of the engagements remain true to the original spirit of the concept, stressing class position. Others take the "cultural economy" approach. This emphasises the role cultural intermediaries play in the market as "professionals of qualification". They "intervene in how consumers perceive and engage with goods" (Matthews and Smith Maguire, p. 4). Associated with Callon, this stems from the vogueish intellectual currents of actor network theory and new economic sociology. Whereas a Bourdieusian approach focuses on the "social composition and class-cultural dispositions" of cultural intermediaries, the cultural economy approach "places more emphasis on [...] technical and material elements", specifically "market devices" (Nixon, pp. 36-37). Matthews and Smith Maguire pitch the collection as an attempt to reconcile these two accounts.

The book's central problems relate to this overarching theoretical framework. In both strands, cultural intermediation implies a contradiction-free harmony between production and consumption. McFall writes that production and consumption are "always already, dynamically connected" and that "the traffic between production and consumption defines them as each other" (pp. 44-46). And, in Pettinger's contribution, cultural intermediaries are characterised as productive consumers. Their own consumption is integral to their work in the sphere of production. In this relationship, Pettinger suggests, they intermediate between the two realms. But both McFall and Pettinger construct a false continuity between production and consumption. The two have a *contradictory* unity, antagonistic and unequal. In capitalist society, the power to consume is always out of step with production, and limited by the wage form. No harmony is possible, only recurrent crisis. The wage is the social form through which life is reproduced. It is presupposed upon unequal relations of property and distribution that guarantee the buying and selling of labour power. Most people must work to live. But the wage they receive is necessarily lower than the value of what is produced. This places certain structural limitations on production and consumption (see Heinrich 2012, pp, 172-4).

Bourdieuian and cultural economy approaches elide this antagonistic relationship. This owes to a foreshortened value theory. There is little engagement with where value comes from, and what people have to go through for it to establish its social rule. In the cultural economy approach, value is seen as a matter of perceptions and ‘meanings’ (Matthews and Smith Maguire, p. 10). What gets left out in this surface-level, uncritical interpretation are the social relations that make value possible. It takes for granted money, commodities, exchange, labour and capitalism. It has no explanation of why it should be that people sell their labour power as a commodity. It does not tell us why this is sold in receipt of a wage used to buy things produced by others in the same situation. For this to happen, preconditions must be in place. People must be repeatedly deprived of the means to produce and acquire, individually or collectively, what they need to live. This separation is not a pleasant process (see Bonefeld 2014, Ch. 4). The theory of value presented here gives no sense of this coercive and antagonistic social basis. But these relations underlie the very possibility of a society ruled by value.

Relatedly, both conceptualisations of cultural intermediation are free of any sense of class antagonism. In a strong contribution, Nixon asserts that both Bourdieu and Callon overlook “human subjectivity”. They take a “technical and limited” perspective vis-à-vis how “subjective processes and desires animate and inform social practice” (p. 41). Ultimately, Nixon suggests, this blinds them to “the articulation between subjectivity, the social trajectories and social formation of individuals and socio-technical devices” (*ibid.*).

The absence of these ‘social trajectories’ is stark. Callon’s theory of valuation lacks historicity. This prevents an understanding of how value relations develop in a ‘social trajectory’ of separation and domination. For Bourdieu’s class theory, the problem is a failure to countenance that class is a negative category from which those subject to it wish to escape (see Bonefeld 2014, Ch. 5). There is no sense of trajectory outside the achievement of further status. For under-qualified “inheritors”, such “semi-bourgeois” occupations shore up social status against downclassing. “[P]arvenus”, on the other hand, can upclass on the back of “devalued qualifications” (Bourdieu, quoted in Smith Maguire, p. 18). Thus, class is not a critical concept for Bourdieu, destructive and to be destroyed, but a matter of status, market position and lifestyle choice to which social agents aspire. Framed so, the misery of class society and the ways in which individuals seek to explode the classed reality of their lives are easily forgotten. The problem with this perspective is that it sees class as something struggled for rather than struggled against. The aspirations of the actors involved reduce to a given status within class society rather than pushing against, outside or beyond it.

This is a shortcoming implicit in many of the contributions here, and I think it relates to the absence of one issue in particular. This issue is *work*. Unfortunately, the collection all too rarely discusses the concrete conditions of cultural intermediary work: desires stifled by management rationalisation; subjectivities denied by the ideological construction of an idealised creative milieu; creativity exploited, lifestyles repackaged and resold; rising rents, with living costs to match; insecurity and precariousness; and a lack of protection, whether through the law or through the collective power of workers to withdraw their labour and fight back. The absence of these issues makes it easy to ignore antagonism. Each

contribution talks about what cultural intermediaries *do*. But this is rarely presented in the context of the institutional structure in which it occurs.

Durrer and O'Brien constitute one exception. They set out specifically to "acknowledg[e] intermediaries' positions within elite arts institutions" (p. 111). Other contributions, too, suggest possible grounds for exploring cultural intermediaries as antagonistic class subjects. Creative labour pushes against the limits of the present. It expresses utopian desires beyond the status allocated to creative workers in capitalist society. It pitches beyond commerce and into the creation of things for their own sake, beauty and enjoyment. But the commercial context rationalises and stifles creativity and nous in pursuit of goals and ends antithetical to those of the creatives involved. Kelly describes how advertising has attracted many artists seeking employment. The artists find it "difficult to negotiate" and "oppressive and creatively restrained" environment (p. 68). The agency-client "asymmetry of power" bends the intermediary's will and creative impulse to "commercial imperative". Conflicts ensue "over the ownership and control of creative work" (*ibid.*). Kelly here achieves a sense of the cultural intermediary as a worker, as a class subject. Intermediaries serve an economic compulsion beyond their control and not of their making. They submit their skills and abilities to ends outside their immediate enjoyment or benefit.

As Matthews and Smith Maguire point out, such a view opposes popular optimism around creative labour and the empowerment and contentment it offers. It highlights "the negative effects that cultural workers experience, including precarious, poor-quality and poorly remunerated employment conditions" (p. 5). Although Miller's chapter is an exception, such a focus is too rarely exerted in this collection. This may owe to the Bourdieusian heritage of the concept. It characterises cultural intermediaries as possessing a positive class status achieved through a generous market position. This approach permits little space to explore the extreme negativity of life and desire in denial. The same applies to the uncritical, antagonism-free value theory of the cultural economy approach. They withdraw from interrogating the antagonistic relations expressed in value, work and consumption. They rule out questions that point beyond what cultural intermediaries currently are to ask what they might be. It entertains little prospect of the potential for those it describes to be agents of social change beyond their present role in society.

The collection is at its strongest when addressing this last point. There are a number of contributions that suggest the political potential of cultural intermediaries as a body of workers occupying a strategically important role within the circuit of capitalist reproduction. Based upon the contributions in this volume, this political potential has two dimensions. The first lies in a shared experience of working conditions. These include insecurity, precariousness and long working hours. They feature struggles over intellectual property rights and the commercialisation and control of creative activity. And they incorporate competing notions of what constitutes good or beautiful work, and differing visions of the value, economic and non-economic, of creative work and its products. Cultural intermediaries share some or all these attributes with other workers. The pre-eminent cultural position intermediaries occupy render them well-placed to agitate on others' behalf.

The second way in which cultural intermediaries may possess the potential to effect social change is internal rather than external to the work they perform. One of the strongest aspects of this volume is the consideration of the presence of other values and aspirations in cultural intermediation. These aspirations may be largely immanent to the working task itself. But they push beyond its commercial context. They point towards other relationships with creativity and its products. Hodges and Edwards discuss the ways in which public relations can “contribute to the facilitation of social change” and participate in a “transformative process”. Whilst public relations presently “provide[s] already powerful institutions with opportunities to further consolidate their position of privilege within society”, they can also “support less powerful groups to challenge the status quo, promote participatory communication and lobby for policy changes” (p. 97). Fairchild, writing about music industry professionals, alerts attention to “anti-corporate, grassroots cultural intermediation” from “informal”, “non-professional” or “amateur” intermediaries with “no interest in joining the parade of corporate convention” (p. 133).

These imaginings of what creative and cultural work might be circulate around “the contested nature of constructing value and legitimacy for cultural goods” (Matthews and Smith Maguire, p. 4). Cultural and creative workers will have different understandings of whether, how and in what ways their work is valuable. A source of antagonism is the submission of these understandings to the rule of capitalist valorisation. Cultural intermediaries may therefore use their enfranchised cultural status and position at the coalface of cultural production to explore and disseminate other values.

This collection is at its best when considering what cultural intermediation can be, and the possible political dimensions it may assume. In this respect, it contributes towards the development of a critical theory of cultural intermediaries. It is critical insofar as it suggests ways of living, working and consuming other than that to which we are presently consigned. But more must be done theoretically to develop the concept in a critical direction. What is needed is a richer engagement with the capitalist context within which cultural intermediary work occurs. For this, it is first necessary for hard thinking about value, labour, wages and class. It is necessary to grasp the preconditions and limitations implied in these social forms. Bourdieu and Callon provide important foundations. But this book suggests that a more critical agenda demands a crack in the Bourdieu-Callon consensus.

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