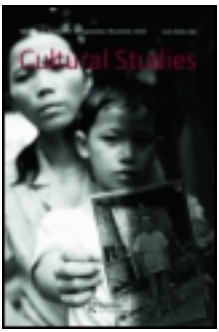

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WHO NEEDS CULTURAL INTERMEDIARIES?

In Douglas Adams' comic science fiction saga *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (BBC Radio Four, 1978; and BBC TV, 1981), Arthur Dent, the tale's hapless hero, finds himself stranded towards the end of his epic adventure on a huge transporter space ship – an 'ark' – carrying a dormant human population towards a new brighter future on some unspecified planet. Dent and his companion, Ford Prefect, are puzzled by the odd array of social types residing within the ark; second-hand car salesmen, advertising account executives, television producers, insurance salesmen, personnel officers, public relations executives and management consultants. When they question the craft's ineffectual captain about this odd collection of types, he reveals that they are on the 'B' ark, one of three launched from the planet of Golgafrincham because of fears that a great catastrophe was about to engulf the world. The captain explains that into the 'A' ark went all the 'brilliant leaders, the scientists, the great artists, all the achievers', while into the 'C' ship went all the people who 'do the actual work, who make things and do things'. The 'B' ark contained, as they had discovered, the 'middle men'. As the travellers pursue their questioning, it transpires that the 'B' ark's unlikely human cargo have, in fact, been duped into embarking on their voyage and that the remaining population of Golgafrincham have never left their home planet. The tale of impending doom had been a spurious one concocted by the productive social groups of Golgafrincham in order to rid themselves of the 'useless third of the population'. By means of this ruse, the Golgafrinchams had managed to create a world free from the unwarranted attention of management consultants, PR executives and advertising account executives and gone on to live full and prosperous lives.

Douglas Adams' satire upon the 'useless' middling sorts of Golgafrincham and its nightmare vision of a society entirely populated by the likes of management consultants and PR people (the society of the 'B' ark), belongs within a well established genre of writings about, and denigrations of, middling social groups

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– particularly the lower middle classes. As Geoff Crossick and Heinz-Gerhard Haupt have noted, a whole genre of literary condescension from Balzac and Zola to H. G. Wells and Brecht has attacked the social and political standing of this social stratum (Crossick and Haupt, 1995: 1). Often these critiques were notable for not only their venom, but also for being written by individuals moving away from their own petite bourgeois backgrounds. As Peter Bailey demonstrates, British post-war writers like John Osborne (the son of an advertising man) offered self-mocking accounts of a social stratum that they knew from the inside and from which they were social migrants (Bailey, 1999). And it is significant that in taking to task the 'unproductive middling groups', Douglas Adams was also turning on a social fraction close to his own subaltern origins (Adams was the son of a teacher and a nurse). The occupational groups that figure in Adams' satire are noteworthy in other ways, though. They represent (second-hand car salesmen notwithstanding) those parts of the lower middle class that have caught the eye of a range of social commentators over recent years. Advertising practitioners, management consultants, PR people, and so on, belong to those intermediary occupations involving information and knowledge intensive forms of work that have come to be seen as increasingly central to economic and cultural life (this is, of course, the point of Adams satire). In this Special Issue of *Cultural Studies* we turn to these occupational groups and to the conceptual terminology that has been mobilized both to place them in the occupational division of labour and understand the social roles they perform. At the heart of this is the idea of 'cultural intermediaries'.

The term 'cultural intermediaries' – or, more precisely, 'new cultural intermediaries' – is most associated with Pierre Bourdieu and is used by him to describe groups of workers involved in the provision of symbolic goods and services. Bourdieu's most extended reference to this group of workers comes in his discussion of middle-brow culture in his mammoth book, *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1984), where he identifies 'the producers of cultural programmes on television or radio or the critics of "quality" newspapers and magazines and all the writer-journalists and journalist-writers' as 'the most typical' of this group (Bourdieu, 1984: 315). Elsewhere he includes practitioners in design, packaging, sales promotion, PR, marketing and advertising within the category of 'new cultural intermediaries', and also cites the example of those involved in the provision of medical and social assistance (such as marriage guidance counselors, sex therapists and dieticians).

As this list of occupations suggests, Bourdieu's notion of 'new cultural intermediaries' is an inclusive, if not quite a catchall, category. He clearly mobilizes the term to capture shifts in the occupational structure in France (and by implication other Western societies) since the 1960s that have seen the growth of educated and salaried occupations in both the public and private sector. These are shifts that other writers – such as Lash and Urry – have described as marking the emergence of a new 'service class' (Lash and Urry, 1987), whilst the terms

'new middle class' and 'new petite bourgeoisie' have also been mobilized to capture these changes in the social structure that have undeniably seen an expansion of the 'social middle' or what was more typically referred to in nineteenth century France as the 'classes moyennes' (Crossick and Haupt, 1995; Burns, 1986).

Bourdieu most strongly links the expansion of this group of 'new cultural intermediaries' and their increasing salience in the occupational structure to the bourgeoning of the consumer sectors of the economy and the associated consolidation of large broadcasting and media organizations. In fact, he sees the new cultural intermediaries as germane to the 'ethical retooling' of consumer capitalism and its promotion of a 'morality of pleasure as duty' (Bourdieu, 1984: 365–71). Bound up with their new prominence is an assertion from Bourdieu that these groups of workers are able to exert, from their position within the cultural institutions, a certain amount of cultural authority as shapers of taste and the inculcators of new consumerist dispositions. Significantly, this is an authority that brings them into conflict with what Bourdieu calls the legitimate producers and reproducers – what we might call traditional intellectuals. And the tension between 'traditional' and 'new intellectuals' is an important, if underdeveloped, theme in Bourdieu's comments on the 'new cultural intermediaries'.

In picking up on Bourdieu's lead, there is still plenty of work to do in both conceptualizing and substantively exploring the position and status of cultural intermediaries. Here we want to offer a few pointers in order to frame the articles that follow in this special issue. The first of these concerns the problematic qualifier 'new' that Bourdieu attaches to 'cultural intermediaries' in *Distinction*. This throws up the question of periodization in relation to the apparent expansion in cultural intermediary occupations. If you like, how new are these occupations and when did they expand? Certainly, the evidence from Britain suggests the need for caution in talking uncritically about the expansion of cultural intermediaries and assigning to them the epithet 'new'. Occupations such as broadcasting and advertising, alongside journalism, expanded markedly in the first half of the twentieth century and, in the case of advertising, decline in terms of the number of people employed from a high point of the 1960s. In no sense, then, are these occupations particularly new and nor are they necessarily expanding (though for a counter argument about the increase in the numbers employed in 'creative work' see Scase and Davis, 1999). There is a need, then, to separate the question of the quantitative expansion of cultural intermediaries from their apparent increasing salience and influence over economic and cultural life. The latter may occur, despite the relative numerical decline of these sectors. This is why we prefer to talk about 'cultural intermediaries', rather than 'new cultural intermediaries'.

Secondly, as we have already suggested, Bourdieu's notion of new cultural intermediaries – and the way the term has been taken up by other writers – is very inclusive and this poses some problems. The most serious concerns the way

the term tends to cut across distinct occupational formations, cultures and forms of expertise, as well as the rather different social composition of discrete cultural intermediary occupations. Thus, for example, broadcasters, journalists and producers in Britain – most especially in the BBC – are a very different occupational formation in terms of social and educational backgrounds and occupational ethos from, say, advertising creatives (Burns, 1977; Nixon, forthcoming). A more differentiated account of these occupations is therefore required; one that can grasp the differences between them, as much as 'family resemblances'.

Thirdly, and following on from the previous two points, there is a serious need for more substantive work on cultural intermediary occupations in order to empirically ground claims about both their place in the occupational structure and the role they play in economic and cultural life. This is particularly important given that quite large claims are made about the significance of these occupational groups – notably by Bourdieu and Featherstone – without much being known about them. Featherstone (1991), for example, cites no empirical evidence about occupations he sees as central to cultural change. At issue here is also the need to disentangle the study of cultural intermediaries from the excessive value judgments that have dogged assessments of these groups. Commentators have either denigrated them, as Bourdieu does, as the source of new forms of social conservatism (and Bourdieu's analysis is notable for its intemperate tone and falls into that genre of antipathy towards the lower middle classes with which we begin) or else celebrated them for their links to a progressive, post-'68 counter culture (as Featherstone does). What we suggest is needed is a more sober assessment of these groups which avoids the pitfalls of either celebration or denunciation.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we want to suggest that there is considerable strategic value to be gained from focusing upon these intermediary occupations. They force, on the one hand, an opening up of the arena of cultural circulation, which has been poorly studied within cultural studies. In particular, in relation to the study of the commercial domain and commercially produced culture, they shift our attention away from the over-emphasis on the moment of consumption that has tended to dominate recent accounts of the commercial field. In doing so, they open up the links between production and consumption and the interplay between these discrete moments in the lifecycle of cultural forms. More than that, by focusing on both the formal expertise and broader intellectual and cultural formation of these practitioners, it becomes possible to scrutinize the links between economic and cultural practices within the sphere of commercial cultural production; a scrutiny that can bring to light, as we have argued elsewhere, the interdependence and relations of reciprocal effect between cultural and economic practices (Nixon, 1996; du Gay, 1997).

The contributors to this volume each, in their different ways, pick up on these conceptual provocations raised by the concept of cultural intermediaries. Keith Negus and Liz McFall both emphasize the need to qualify the conceptual

reach of the term and to contest some of the more ambitious claims made in its name. For Negus, amongst other things, there is a need to relativize the emphasis on the more 'creative' kinds of intermediary occupations by looking at the more prosaic, but crucial contributions of practitioners like accountants working within cultural institutions. For McFall, the study of cultural intermediaries requires careful historical qualification. And while they both continue to deploy the term, they each offer important revisions. Liz McFall's article further demonstrates the value of sustained empirical reflection on this grouping of workers and she brings a quizzical eye and historical sensitivity to that most neophiliac and presentist of occupations, advertising. Lise Skov and Matt Soar's respective papers also add much to our knowledge of discrete cultural intermediary occupations. What emerges from their papers is a clearer sense (in Soar's case) of both the professional ideologies of advertising and design practitioners and (in Skov's case) the particular conditions under which fashion designers labour.

Angela McRobbie also centrally addresses the characteristics of work within these occupations. Focusing on contemporary public debates in Britain about the 'creative industries', she offers a bold sense of a number of contradictory dynamics at work in this sector. These include both the heady celebration of 'fun at work' in these occupations and the high levels of insecurity and individualism that mark out their employment relations. Engaging with contemporary sociological accounts about reflexive modernization and the growth of what Zygmunt Bauman has called the 'individualized society', McRobbie further ponders on whether these areas of work pose in a particularly sharp way processes of re-traditionalization within economic life. For McRobbie, like the other contributors, it is the capacity of cultural intermediaries to condense and focus broader questions about social and cultural change which makes them worthy of study and why cultural intermediaries do, in this sense, matter.

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