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Production Cultures: New Studies of Work and Labour

In recent years, a growing number of scholars have turned their attention to “production-side cultural studies” (Liu 2004), “production studies” of media industries (Mayer, Banks and Caldwell 2009) and analysis of specific “production cultures” (Caldwell 2008; see also Ross 2002; 2004). While matters of labour and class have long been of interest to cultural studies, writers such as Alan Liu have argued that the more obvious preoccupation with consumption practices can only become outdated as “the number of hours spent working as opposed to consuming or ‘leisuring’ continues to climb” (2004: 417). Indeed, the latest round of interest in labour might even be read in tandem with changes to academic work itself, and the long hours of “sacrificial labour” demanded of professionals of all kinds in an information economy (Ross 2004; Gregg 2009).

This panel introduces some leading empirical and theoretical studies of labour and work in cultural studies to advance an agenda for studying production cultures. Drawing on research conducted in the UK, USA and China, it compares frameworks for understanding production cultures with a particular focus on the conditions for cultural labour in specific national settings. Each paper considers the continued usefulness of the idea of class to explain the experiences of new kinds of workers in emerging media and information technology industries. They also consider the likelihood for solidarities to develop among workers across geographical and social distances. This empirically-driven and conceptually innovative discussion promises to shed light on the forms of cultural and financial capital currently affecting the fortunes of workers in a rapidly evolving media and labour landscape.