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Minding the Cool Gap: New Elites in Blue-Collar Service Work

Richard E. Ocejo

CAMEo Cuts

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Minding the Cool Gap:
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In this edition of CAMEo Cuts, Richard E. Ocejo summarises insights from his recent book *Masters of Craft: Old Jobs in the New Urban Economy* (Princeton University Press, 2017). Based on an extensive ethnography of traditionally 'blue-collar' service trades – such as barbering, distilling, butchering and bar-keeping – his research shows how new cohorts of 'elite', middle-class producers and consumers are leading to the creation of new social distinctions and the rise of 'cool' service work. This essay outlines some of the social consequences for those who have traditionally occupied manual service trades – the socially disadvantaged and social minorities – when their jobs suddenly become 'cool'.

About the author

Richard E. Ocejo is Associate Professor of sociology at John Jay College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY). His research primarily examines the intersection of culture and economy in today's cities, urban growth policies, and gentrification. He is the author of *Masters of Craft: Old Jobs in the New Urban Economy* (2017) and *Upscaling Downtown: From Bowery Saloons to Cocktail Bars in New York City* (2014), both with Princeton University Press, and the editor of *Ethnography and the City: Readings on Doing Urban Fieldwork* (2012), with Routledge. In autumn 2017 Richard was Visiting Researcher at CAMEo.

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The Charisma, and Problems, of Culture Work

When we talk about something being 'cool', we talk about it possessing some innate quality, an irresistible allure. In sociology we can trace the origins of this concept to the classic writings of Max Weber, and his discussion of 'charisma' and 'charismatic leaders', or people who hold 'specific gifts of the body and spirit…believed to be supernatural, not available to everybody' (1946, p. 245). Despite the historical trend of increasing rationalisation, and the resultant disenchantment (or 'demagification') of modern life, the world retains some fragments of magical elements (Bennett, 2001). Charismatic people, with their magical powers, and their followers who recognise their magic, represent ruptures in the historical progression of rationalisation. Most importantly for my purposes, Weber says that charisma itself can become rationalised and routinised, such as in a bureaucracy. This transformation typically occurs when a charismatic leader dies, and followers carry on in the person's name and spirit. In short, charisma need not reside solely in an individual, and even routinised charisma can maintain some of its powerful force.

In the decades since Weber's writing, scholars have expanded the concept of charisma to include everyday, non-ecclesiastic forms, such as those found throughout secular institutions and organizations (Shils, 1965; Kanter 1972; Biggart 1989). Cultural industries are

great examples of charismatic institutions (Chen, 2012). In his research on interns and employees at record labels, Alexandre Frenette (2013; 2016) argues that the institutional charisma promoted by the music industry is enough to keep workers devoted to working in it (for at least some time) despite the highly precarious nature of their jobs. In other words, even though they may be 'bad' jobs (Kalleberg, 2011) - that is, they do not pay well, offer few material benefits or clear opportunities for advancement, and even though the tasks some workers do are not creative in themselves - just contributing to a company whose larger purpose is to create art and culture is enough to attract workers of all backgrounds (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011; McRobbie 2016). Culture is cool.

'Do what you love' has become a powerful piece of advice to inspire people who are trying to decide on a future job or career path (Tokumitsu, 2015; Duffy, 2017). Even before it became a modern mantra, many people pursued their passions in employment, especially in the cultural industries, where deriving pleasure from one's work has always provided powerful compensation in light of the relatively scarce material rewards afforded to workers, amid difficult conditions for achieving success. Because they deal with being creative and producing culture, jobs in the cultural industries are generally seen as 'cool' (Neff et al., 2005). But 'cool' work is hardly immune to problems of inequality and injustice. As Mark Banks (2017) has

recently argued, many people do not have the opportunity to pursue work in cultural production due to such factors as limited access to education and material resources as well as being disadvantaged by the social distinctions that are applied to the value of cultural objects. Quite simply, despite the allegedly progressive nature of cultural industries and the efforts of their leaders at 'inclusion', some groups still tend to get excluded from participating in cool work more than others, and, when they are included, face challenges that others do not.

Building from this insight and the analyses in my own recent book on how workers have turned ordinary manual labour jobs into appealing craft work (Ocejo 2017), in this piece I will discuss how a 'cool gap' exists in blue-collar service work between workers from different social backgrounds and with different identities, as well as between different jobs. I will focus especially on the important role that gender, race/ethnicity and social class play in the types of cool work that I, and others, have studied. I will also explain why some seemingly similar jobs and industries do not get labelled as 'cool' while others do. The problem with this gap, I argue, is that cool jobs can give social status and benefits – not to mention more tangible material rewards and opportunities – that many more people ought to have the chance to obtain if we want a more just economy and society.

Masters of Craft: **A Synopsis**

For my book I spent six years studying four occupations that I had identified as having undergone a fascinating transformation from typically low-status to 'cool'. I looked at cocktail bartenders, craft distillers, upscale men's barbers, and whole-animal butchers

and butcher shop workers – each a specialised version of rather mundane jobs in common industries. What got me really interested in these occupations was *who* exactly was transforming them – namely people with other options in the labour market: college graduates, people with career options in other, more prestigious industries, and (in general) people rich and high in social and cultural capital. People with such backgrounds do not ordinarily pursue careers in blue-collar jobs, but that's what these workers in the special versions of these jobs were doing. Additionally, they were not experiencing them as a form of 'slumming' or as downward social mobility for people from their privileged backgrounds. On the contrary, they saw opportunities to win status and prestige in their jobs and consciously enjoyed the psychic, immaterial rewards they received for their work (Menger 1999; Oakley 2009; Frenette 2016).

Such workers achieved these twin results by changing the philosophies that traditionally undergird their occupations. Once regarded as primarily service and/or manual labour jobs, the middle-class entrant has striven to make them appear more technical, intellectual, and creative. They have enhanced the craftsmanship, or the technical skills and notion of doing good work for its own sake (Sennett 2008) involved in these jobs. They've made having and being able to communicate (often esoteric) knowledge about their work practices - and the taste and aesthetics therein - integral to the job. And they've made being able to innovate in their work, to come up with new ideas for their offerings, a central task. As I found, cocktail bartenders don't just make and serve drinks, look after their customers' needs, and tend the bar. They study and practice 'mixology', a specialized way of making cocktails involving precise recipes and

techniques, matching drinks to customers' tastes while trying to expand the latter, and creating new cocktails. Craft distillers do not just operate large machinery according to certain specifications and follow formulas to mass-produce a product. They make small batches of spirits with varying flavour profiles from carefully – and usually locally – sourced ingredients, and increasingly they share knowledge of their production processes and products with the public through tours of their facilities and tasting rooms. Upscale men's barbers do not just cut men's hair with speed and efficiency. They use new and classic barbering techniques and devote time to giving men specialised and detailed haircuts, while conveying a sense of style and even masculinity to them. And whole-animal butcher shop workers do not just cut and sell meat. They use artisanal butchery techniques and a philosophy behind what is 'good' (i.e., ethical, local, flavourful; see Ocejo, 2014) meat, which they also teach to their customers.
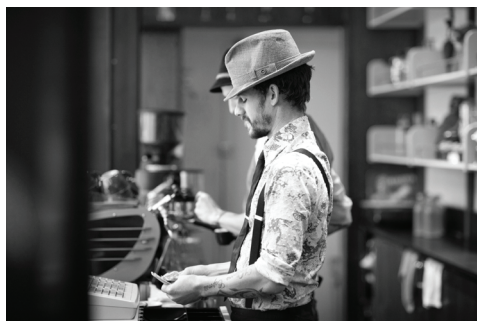
Mixologist at work. Photo courtesy of Matt Biddulph

Through these work practices, these workers are now among the new elite in cultural taste-making. Their combination of mental, manual, and interactive labour grants them greater status than workers in more common versions of these jobs. And, at a time when knowledge – and technology-based jobs are among the most desired and compensated,

they have made these occupations viable work alternatives for people who can choose their own careers. In short, these jobs are 'cool'.

The workers I studied are not in traditionally cool cultural industries like music, art, or fashion. They work in the service and light manufacturing industries. But they work with consumer products and services that are now more invested with distinctive cultural value, and by doing so, have become influential as cultural taste-makers. The media - both traditional print and new digital forms - regularly cover their work and businesses, and consumers avidly compliment them, while comparing and contrasting their distinctive offerings. Everybody, it seems, thinks these workers, what they do, and where they work, are 'cool'. As such, in the labour they perform, they receive and accrue many of the social benefits to be found in conventional cultural industries work – a sense of 'passion', 'psychic rewards', and an elevated social status. The problem, however, is that these social benefits are not evenly distributed across all workers working in jobs with 'cool' potential, and the ability to obtain these jobs remains quite exclusive.

The Paradox of Commitment, and other Gender Issues

My colleague, Yasemin Besen-Cassino, and I have recently co-analysed our datasets to explore some of the differences in how men and women experience 'cool' service work. In her research Besen-Cassino (2014) has examined how young people who work in coffee shops identify with and consume their employer's brand through their labour, and she has also collected similar data on people who work in clothing stores. Like my workers, the people she studied are drawn to these jobs because they think they are cool. They like

the brands behind their businesses and they like working with cool products like coffee and clothing. But when we looked more closely at our data through a gender lens, we found that men and women were experiencing their jobs differently.

Employers and managers all expect some degree of commitment from their workers, such as becoming knowledgeable in the products they sell, working extra hours on short notice, and helping out colleagues. However, a key finding is that when the women Besen-Cassino studied show commitment to their jobs, they were often accused by their managers of only being interested in working in these businesses for the 'perks', like discounts on coffee and clothes or getting to hang out with their friends. Their efforts in learning about fashion and coffee were not recognised as being genuinely professional or aspirational, which limited their potential for development and their chances for staking out a career path in these industries. Being committed, for these women, is a paradox; it's 'damned if you do, damned if you don't.' So even though fashion and coffee have become cool industries, the women who work in them do not often get to experience them as such. The men I studied, on the other hand, are not harmed by being committed. On the contrary, their commitment signified a dedication to the business and a desire for inclusion in the occupational community. They were rewarded for expanding their repertoire of knowledge and skills, which they used to both cultivate an occupational identity and chart a career path.

I also studied women in those specialised jobs which I analysed in my book, and I found that they experienced customer interactions differently from men. The service jobs I focused on are all masculine-coded, and most of the workers in them are men (except in the feminine-coded roles within these businesses, such as the servers in cocktail bars and counter workers in butcher shops). These businesses also emphasise imagery and motifs from their classic, old-timey versions: speakeasy-style cocktail bars, farmhouse distilleries, and vintage barber and butcher shops. Customers in these businesses often expect a similar 'classic' consumption experience, which means having men and women serve, but that men assume the expert role of explaining products and services to the consumer. The women I studied recognised (especially from male customers) when such an expectation wasn't met, or worse, when men felt their masculinity was being challenged. As Rachael, a counter worker at the butcher shop I studied, put it:

That's actually something that took me a while to realise, to sort of come to terms with, you know? There is an interesting power dynamic. Sometimes with somebody who knows very little about the product and is very open to asking me questions and really taking your suggestions, you're sort of in charge. And then there will be people who come in and they are really defensive and they don't want to feel, you know, belittled in any way. It happens with men and women, but I think the best examples are with men who come in with a girl or even with a group of friends and they kind of want to show off how much they know about meat and they don't really want suggestions from me.

Performing emotional labour (Hochschild, 1982), or controlling emotions to elicit an emotional response from consumers, is often the expectation of women in service work. It can even trump the technical knowledge

and skill they have and weaken their efforts to portray their own professionalism (Gimlin 1996). In short, women are certainly able to get cool jobs like the ones I studied. But once they do, they potentially face challenges in advancing in them and even in experiencing them as cool. There are some groups, however, who struggle to even get through the door or have the work they do recognised as being in any way cool.

Diversity Dilemmas and Uncool Jobs

The majority of the people I studied in these cool jobs are men, but the vast majority of them are white, well-educated, and/or middle class. While they are fundamentally providing manual and service labour, these jobs require workers to know and be able to speak about cultural tastes, especially to a culturally-savvy group of consumers who, at the very least, have disposable income for such high-priced goods and services, and who are sometimes very wealthy. These workers already know - or are more easily able to acquire - understandings of specialist taste, like why filet mignon isn't a very flavourful cut of meat. Less educated people - who have typically occupied mundane versions of these jobs - do not usually have the 'right' set of cultural reference points to fulfill the requirements of their specialised versions. Owners and managers of these businesses certainly do not directly discriminate against people from non-white and working-class populations. Most are quite progressive thinkers and highly tolerant in their everyday lives. But they often fall victim to what they see as an imperative to adhere to the 'aesthetic labour' requirements within their industry, or to hire workers who 'look good and sound right' (Williams and Connell 2010) for the business and its clientele. And in this case, looking and sounding the part entails being able to also show technical skills and cultural understanding in ways that a typical customer might identify with and recognise. Managers therefore usually end up hiring people who resemble each other and who tend to embody their imagined ideal of the aesthetically-presentable 'expert' – which tends to betray a classed, racialised, and gendered coding.

It is often claimed that workers who do not share the 'right' backgrounds, appearances and cultural reference points simply don't 'get it', as they are unable to convincingly and confidently perform the cultural repertoires the job requires. Without the same social backgrounds and orientations to taste, and without the comfort of communicating with people from different (often higher status) backgrounds about cultural products and services, people from underprivileged groups, such as racial and ethnic minorities and the working-class, tend to get excluded from these occupational communities. It is more difficult for them to 'be cool' in these fields and among these audiences. On several occasions I observed people from different backgrounds (specifically working-class butchers from Mexico and working-class barbers from Russia) get fired from businesses because they could not put on complete performances, or else be reduced to occupying lower-rung, unskilled, and 'backstage' jobs without much chance for advancement (e.g. Latinos working as barbacks and African-Americans working as porters in the butcher shop kitchen). These workers tend thereby to miss out on the social benefits – prestige, respect, status, and public attention – of elite blue-collar work.

A question I often get from people when discussing *Masters of Craft* is why some jobs and even some industries seem to get labelled 'cool' while others do not. What is it about

the jobs I study that makes them - but not others - cool, and who gets to decide anyway? Why are there no cool plumbers or electricians or mechanics? Blue-collar workers like these certainly have technical skills and craft knowledge. But there are a few differences that help keep some traditional, well-paid working-class jobs labelled as *un*cool.

First, while they entail creativity, these trades are reparative or in maintenance. Their workers fix and service products; they don't make or create them. And they usually undertake work in private, behind closed doors, not in public before a welcoming and sometimes knowing (and discerning) audience. Working in someone's home instead of in public deprives workers of the opportunity (or need) to showcase their skills and knowledge in front of both colleagues and consumers, and to receive regular validating feedback and adulation for their work. Indeed, getting to learn and work as part of a team and the 'emotional tip' they get from consumers who might immediately tell them they love what they make and do for them are important reasons the workers I studied gave for pursuing these jobs. The cool workers want to perform. A further difference is that people would rather not call a plumber, because it usually means something is wrong. Going to a bar, getting a haircut, and buying new meat products are usually more enjoyable consuming activities; acts of pleasure, not necessity – built around performative encounters and exchanges between provider and customer.

Along with the nature and setting of the work tasks, the knowledge behind the occupations that workers use also differs between cool and uncool jobs. Some sets of knowledge have been valorised and legitimated as cool by various cultural intermediaries (Bourdieu,

1984) while others have not. The ideas behind products like craft cocktails, small batches of spirits, and artisanally butchered meat, each made from ingredients and materials that have a distinct provenance, and services like well-styled haircuts are considered special and worthy of attention (not to mention higher-than-average prices) among the many other artifacts in the symbolic economy (Zukin 1995). While many blue-collar tradespeople may possess and use a lot of specialised knowledge in their day-to-day work tasks, they cannot control which ideas get seen as culturally vibrant.

Toward Greater Inclusion in 'Cool' Work

The obvious solution to the 'cool gap' is for employers in cool industries to make stronger efforts to hire people from more diverse backgrounds, and to nurture them through their socialisation into the business and occupational community. Doing so, and challenging the informal rules of 'aesthetic labour', would go a long way toward sharing some of the social benefits of cool work with diverse groups. But the obstacles are greater than the hiring decisions of a few people in these industries. They stem from inequalities concerning gender, race/ethnicity, and social class that are deeply rooted in society. Furthermore, one should not have to be in a 'cool' job to receive social benefits from undertaking work. A shift in focus from valuing only cool jobs to valuing *work* as being intrinsically worthy of respect - including manual labour and service work of all varieties - would be necessary.

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