The Sweatshop Sublime

BRUCE ROBBINS

THERE IS A PASSAGE IN DAVID LODGE'S 1988 NOVEL *NICE WORK* IN WHICH THE HEROINE, A MARXIST-FEMINIST CRITIC WHO teaches English literature, looks out the window of an airplane and sees the division of labor.

> Factories, shops, offices, schools, beginning the working day. People crammed into rush-hour buses and trains, or sitting at the wheels of their cars in traffic jams, or washing up breakfast things in the kitchens of pebble-dashed semis. All inhabiting their own little worlds, oblivious of how they fitted into the total picture. The housewife, switching on her electric kettle to make another cup of tea, gave no thought to the immense complex of operations that made that simple action possible: the building and maintenance of the power station that produced the electricity, the mining of coal or pumping of oil to fuel the generators, the laying of miles of cable to carry the current to her house, the digging and smelting and milling of ore or bauxite into sheets of steel or aluminum, the cutting and pressing and welding of the metal into the kettle's shell, spout and handle, the assembling of these parts with scores of other components—coils, screws, nuts, bolts, washers, rivets, wires, springs, rubber insulation, plastic trimmings; then the packaging of the kettle, the advertising of the kettle, the marketing of the kettle, to wholesale and retail outlets, the transportation of the kettle to warehouses and shops, the calculation of its price, and the distribution of its added value between all the myriad people and agencies concerned in its production and circulation. The housewife gave no thought to all this as she switched on her kettle.

To contemplate one's kettle and suddenly realize, first, that one is the beneficiary of an unimaginably vast and complex social whole and, second (a point further emphasized elsewhere in the novel), that this means benefiting from the daily labor of the kettle- and electricity-producing workers, much of it unpleasant and underremunerated, is not entirely outside everyday experience. What seems special about the passage is a third realization: that this moment of consciousness will not be converted into action. The passage concludes:

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> What to do with the thought was another question. It was difficult to decide whether the system that produced the kettle was a miracle of human ingenuity and co-operation or a colossal waste of resources, human and natural. Would we all be better off boiling our own water in a pot hung over an open fire? Or was it the facility to do such things at the touch of a button that freed men, and more particularly women, from servile labour and made it possible for them to become literary critics? [. . .] She gave up on the conundrum, and accepted another cup of coffee from the stewardess. (192–93)

Let me now juxtapose this passage with a *New Yorker* cartoon by Roz Chast. Its protagonist, "you," is an unshaven man in pyjamas. "You" combine Lodge's tea-drinking housewife with his airborne intellectual; your feet are firmly on the ground, indeed you are not yet out your door, yet you do "give a thought" to the system that provides you with goods and services. It is this thought that we follow. At the top of the cartoon are the words "One morning, while getting dressed." From that common point, lines branch off toward boxes containing different possible outcomes. One morning, while getting dressed, you either do or do not examine the label of your shirt. If you do, you either do or do not realize the conditions of life under which this shirt was, or perhaps was not, produced: the pitifully inadequate wages, not to speak of the locked fire exits, the arbitrary harassments and firings, the refusal of genuine union representation, and so on. But whether your thoughts linger or not, whether the shirt turns out to have been made in Mexico or Thailand or the United States, the result is the same as if you had not examined the label. All lines converge in the end on the same box: you put on the shirt and forget about it.

In Lodge's book and Chast's cartoon, there is a moment of insight accompanied by a surge of power. In thought, at least, you are launched on a one-click leap from the tender, drowsy privacy of early morning at home—the shirt not yet on your back, the first cup of tea just finished—to the outer reaches of a world economic system of notoriously inconceivable magnitude and interdependence, a system that brings goods from the ends of the earth (as Baudelaire put it, with an accuracy that you suddenly recognize) to satisfy your slightest desire.[1] Yet at the same time this insight is also strangely powerless. Your sudden, heady access to the global scale is not access to a commensurate power of action *on* the global scale. You have a cup of tea or coffee. You get dressed. Just as suddenly, just as shockingly, you are returned to yourself in all your everyday smallness.

"That in comparison with which everything else is small" is one of Kant's descriptions of the sublime, also defined as "a feeling of the inadequacy of [the] imagination for presenting the ideas of a whole, wherein the imagination reaches its maximum, and, in striving to surpass it, sinks back into itself, by which, however, a kind of emotional satisfaction is produced" (88, 91). Considering how Lodge and Chast play up and down the scales of the immensely large and infinitesimally small, how they combine pleasure with pain in contemplating the obscure infinity of the social whole, and above all the paradox of their making us sense that we possess transcendent powers (albeit powers exercised on our behalf and in this case without our active will) yet finally letting us "sink back into ourselves," so that we fail to express those powers in any potentially risky, disobedient action, I suggest that we provisionally call this trope, with a certain inevitable discomfort, the sweatshop sublime.[2]

The sublime may not seem like the most useful way to pose the question of our responsibilities as citizens faced with the reality of sweatshop labor. A certain usefulness will I hope become more apparent as I proceed. But the pairing of sweatshops and sublimity is also intended to raise issues of politics and aesthetics, scholarship and commitment, that have become irritatingly familiar of late to progressives working in and around the humanities. Rather

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than rehearse those issues here, I simply assert, by way of setting an agenda, two propositions that the notion of a sweatshop sublime is meant to suggest. First, literary critics in allegorical airplanes, looking down from above on putatively unconscious housewives—let's say, intellectuals contemplating nonintellectuals—are subject to the same dilemma of concern and confusion, action and apathy, as Lodge's heroine. To recognize that this *is* a dilemma means that we should not expect any simple solution to it. And to recognize that it is a *shared* dilemma rather than one resulting from the uniqueness of our work ought to help us calibrate more accurately the responsibilities that do and do not attach to that work.

At the same time (my second proposition), the idea that intellectuals do not escape this dilemma is not merely an argument in favor of modestly retracting some of the political expectations we attach to our work. It's also a fact of wider political importance. This is especially true for those of us searching (perhaps immodestly) for political answers that would operate on the same global or international scale as the causes of our ethical and political problems. If internationalism in the desirable sense is ever going to come into existence, if we are ever going to see some organized impulse toward the equalization of life chances between those who make shirts and those who wear them, this change will clearly not happen by means of a sudden mass exercise of Kantian ethics. It will happen as an outgrowth of habitual desires, fears, and anxieties, embarrassed perceptions and guilty pleasures that, though pervaded by thought, do not belong on that level of rigorous conceptual rationality Kant elsewhere demanded. Like the childhood experience of being told to eat an unappetizing food because children in other countries are starving, the experience of sweatshop sublimity is an instance of this illogical but peremptory category. Unpropitious as it may seem, this limited moment of ethically inspired consumer consciousness is just the sort of raw or semiprocessed phenomenological material in which private and public, domestic and international are fused, and it is out of such material that an internationalist antiglobalization politics on a mass scale will have to emerge, if indeed it ever emerges. To put it in other terms, the moment is a rough analogue to what Antonio Gramsci called the "national-popular": an imperfect and historically determined version of common sense, perhaps only emerging but significant enough to be worth tracking, that links the thoughts and feelings of ordinary people to the fate of others in a larger collectivity (421). To Gramsci this collectivity was the nation. But I see no reason why collectivity formation should stop at the nation's borders, as if fellow feeling found its natural and inevitable telos in nationality. The gradually increasing reservoir of everyday tropes and images that connect our sense of ourselves and our fate with the fates of those who are not our fellow citizens can thus be thought of, I propose, as the international-popular.

It is to be expected that the international-popular will fall well short of any ideal action-oriented solidarity. But it is also to be expected that, under present global conditions, solidarity and even action itself will fall similarly short, will be subject to the same sorts of quasi-sensory, all-too-human interference that we have come to associate with the aesthetic—the illegitimate but seemingly irremediable tyranny of the close over the distant; the analogous perspectivisms of the other senses; the vulnerability to shapeliness, decibel level, boredom, and so on. Thus, sweatshop sublimity offers grounds for anyone interested in defending the significance to society at large of work performed in the domain of the aesthetic—a kind of case that can never rely on the language of the aesthetic alone, that must step outside that language to anchor itself in other interests and concerns.

Now, there are of course things to be done about sweatshops. The literature of groups like the National Labor Committee, the Campaign

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for Labor Rights, and United Students against Sweatshops abounds in invitations to sudden perception more or less like the cartoon's. For example: "When you purchase a shirt in Wal-Mart, do you ever imagine young women in Bangladesh forced to work from 7:30 a.m. to 8:00 p.m., seven days a week, paid just 9 cents to 20 cents an hour [. . .]?" But this literature always follows with a section called something like "What We Can Do," urging readers to write to Wal-Mart with specific and entirely reasonable demands. And it has real grounds to claim, as it does, "We do have an impact. We do have a voice" (Natl. Labor Committee). It has helped rally supporters, and it has won a number of small but significant victories. The celebrity of the American television personality Kathie Lee Gifford was successfully used against her, and against the brands she endorsed, to publicize sweatshop abuses in Honduras; many American universities have agreed to new standards concerning how school sweatshirts and other paraphernalia are to be manufactured. If little progress has been made on the crucial questions of wages and the right to unionize, where corporations have been most resistant, it is nonetheless a genuine accomplishment that such groups have brought the beginnings of transparency, monitoring, and accountability to the murky domain of anonymous subcontracting in which the brand-name multinationals have so profitably been hiding out. The antisweatshop movement, increasingly active on United States campuses, was one of the most powerful constituents of the volatile anti-WTO protest mixture in Seattle and since. Moves toward alliance between students and labor unions and between unions and the environmental groups are two of the most promising features of recent international activism against no-holds-barred globalization.

In short, to discover that the sales price of one Disney Pocohantas T-shirt, sold at Wal-Mart for $10.97, amounts to five days' wages for the women who sewed that shirt is not necessarily to be struck down by paralysis and inertia, though it helps if some available mode of action is specified. Even the Chast cartoon, which describes lethargy, might also be interpreted as a provocation intended to shock us out of lethargy. It is not hard to find literary analogues in which economic epiphany leads toward rather than away from action. Many will no doubt remember the passage toward the end of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* in which Dorothea, who has just spent a miserable and sleepless night after finding Will in a compromising position with Rosamond, gets up at dawn and asks herself, "What should I do—how should I act now, this very day, if I could clutch my own pain, and compel it to silence, and think of those three?"

> It had taken long for her to come to that question, and there was light piercing into the room. She opened her curtains, and looked out towards the bit of road that lay in view, with fields beyond, outside the entrance-gates. On the road there was a man with a bundle on his back and a woman carrying her baby; in the field she could see figures moving—perhaps the shepherd with his dog. Far off in the bending sky was the pearly light; and she felt the largeness of the world and the manifold wakings of men to labour and endurance. She was a part of that involuntary, palpitating life, and could neither look out on it from her luxurious shelter as a mere spectator, nor hide her eyes in selfish complaining.
>
> What she would resolve to do that day did not yet seem quite clear, but something that she could achieve stirred her as with an approaching murmur which would soon gather distinctness.[3]
>
> (544)

Dorothea follows through on her resolution to act. Though the sphere of her action is quite limited—it does not include, for example, the people she sees outside her window or the system that sends them into the fields at that hour—her resolution is rewarded with visible results. Like those in the antisweatshop movement, she feels with a jolt her place in the "involuntary, palpitating" world of labor around her, resolves

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to do something, and does. With such an example in mind, it's tempting to conclude that the texts by Lodge and Chast represent a moral step backward, a sophisticated evasion of the responsibility for action.

But the sweatshop sublime is not a simple or easily avoidable error. Indeed, appearances to the contrary, it is the mode in which Eliot spends much of her time writing. Dorothea's early-morning revelation, in which everyone else who is awake is going off to work and only she remains behind in her "luxurious shelter," has been anticipated some chapters earlier by what is surely the novel's most direct reference to the sublime and perhaps also its most sublime moment. "If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life," Eliot writes in a famous sentence, "it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence" (135).

In the later scene, Dorothea hears the grass grow. She takes in the daily "labour and endurance" that put the bread on her table but that do not ordinarily attract any notice. From that extraordinary perception, she draws stern, not to say self-punishing, conclusions. The problem is the self-punishment, which is just what the metaphor of hearing the grass grow predicts. Going to see Rosamond is action, but action that displays an altruistic self-effacement so radical as to leave behind almost no self, or no self-interest. To hear the "roar which lies on the other side of silence" is indeed, from the point of view of an ordinary self, to die. The purely disinterested, selfless self that remains to Dorothea is only too well suited to the metaphor, for it is incapable of forceful action that would change the rules or terms of ordinariness. Forceful, extraordinary action of this sort is rendered irrelevant, if not precluded, by the notion of hearing the grass grow. Asking us to hear the grass grow is not asking us to interfere with it. The only imperative here is to be conscious of what is already happening, to respect what exists. And respect for what exists is a better argument against change than for it. If the division of labor in the early-morning passage is like the grass in the "hearing the grass grow" passage, and I think it is, then the same moral applies: the only scandal is unconsciousness of the division of labor, not failure to change the division of labor. As Steven Marcus puts it in an essay on Eliot's social theory, "Society, however errant and unfair some of its arrangements may be, is never a scandal in this way of conceiving things. To say so would be tantamount to saying that human existence itself is a scandal" (204).[4]

Among the commonplaces of Eliot criticism that are relevant here are the larger story of Dorothea's abandonment of her heroic, Saint Theresa–like ideal of action; as a partial explanation for this abandonment, her intermittent attraction to the values of the landholding gentry, who owned a good deal of grassland and had famously mixed feelings about plans for modernizing interference with it; and the point Raymond Williams made in *Culture and Society* about Eliot's view of social interdependence:

> Her favorite metaphor for society is a network: a "tangled skein"; a "tangled web" [. . .]. "One fears," she remarked, "to pull the wrong thread, in the tangled scheme of things." The caution is reasonable, but the total effect of the image false. For in fact every element in the complicated system is active: the relationships are changing, constantly, and any action—even abstention [. . .]—affects, even if only slightly [. . .] the very nature of the complication.

Eliot fails in her depiction of working people, Williams concludes, because to her "there seems 'no right thread to pull.' Almost any kind of social action is ruled out" (108–09).

Lodge's moment of sublimity produces more or less the same effect. In the name of realism, he too chastises and paralyzes his would-be activist heroine. For both novelists, to glimpse even for a moment the unimaginable face of society as a whole is to go through a near-death

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experience in which the activist self dissolves. Forced to ask, "Are my hands clean?"—to quote a sweatshop poem by the African American writer Bernice Johnson Reagon—each loses the moral leverage that has helped her challenge the status quo and thus sinks back into the private. Sublimity is not the end of action—Lodge's Robyn, like Dorothea, is successful in her personal mission—but to repeat Williams's judgment, "any kind of social action is ruled out."

Yet "social action" sets a high standard, for the novel and for academic discourse like ours. To say that Eliot rules it out is to imply that it would otherwise be available. Is it available even to so severe a critic of Eliot as Williams—available, that is, while he writes criticism? Francis Mulhern, in a book entitled *Culture/Metaculture*, suggests that Williams's judgment of Eliot can be extended to most if not all of the culture-and-society tradition Williams so influentially assembled, a tradition that has joined Marxists with Romantic reactionaries on the common ground of visions like those of Eliot and Lodge, visions of organic interdependence. For Mulhern, Williams's identification of culture as ordinary, which inaugurates the era of cultural studies, has much the same effect as Eliot's "hear the grass grow" openness to the ordinary. In Williams's words, "The arguments which can be grouped under [the heading of culture] do not point to any inevitable action or affiliation" (qtd. in Mulhern 66). Williams stands at the juncture between the older *Kulturkritik* tradition of Thomas Mann, T. S. Eliot, F. R. Leavis, and company, for which culture was extraordinary, a standard cutting against mass society, and cultural studies, for which culture is ordinary, hence not readily separable from the status quo. But this break is not as great as it appears, Mulhern suggests, for both senses of culture are antipolitical. The cultural studies formula "Everything is political" leaves nothing political in a usefully specifiable sense and thus has the same practical effect as Mann's explicit ideal of the unpolitical man, who is inspired by culture to reject with disgust mass democracy and political instrumentality as such. In other words, Dorothea looking out her window in the morning, hearing the grass grow, sensing the organic interdependency of the division of labor, is a figure for the academic study of culture *tout court*, whether in the older or the present generation. Both versions of literary criticism represent the individual's relation to an obscure, infinite whole that is politically compelling yet seemingly deterred by its premises from resulting in a proper political subject or proper political action.[5]

I will not pursue this parallel here, though there is more to be said, for example, about how Dorothea is eventually rewarded for her visit to Rosamond (with the news that Will loves her after all). We humanists too are rewarded for our apparent altruism, with employment that is not high-paying but is relatively stable, unusually autonomous, and unusually gratifying—desirable enough, in short, to make others wonder whether we are quite as disinterested as we pretend. Being apparently outside the division of labor helps us too secure a place in the division of labor. For this reason, inaction should not be seen as a lapse that humanists tumble into in a moment of moral inattention and that can thus be corrected by resonant calls to stand up and grasp once again their designated responsibilities. Inaction, or hesitation when action seems called for, is built into the conceptual structure we inhabit. So, too, therefore, are calls to responsibility, which must be perpetually repeated and must remain perpetually unanswered. One of the strangest things about words like *action* and *activism*, at least as they are currently used in the humanities, is their functional equivalence to apparently distant words like *culture*, *intellectual*, and *art*, each of which is accorded the privilege of transcending the division of labor. Even when revolutionary action is not meant, *action* is the latest in a series of terms that, for reasons that go back to our disciplinary formation or deformation, we have asked to stand for

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the magical resolution of social contradictions, for the ideal unities, for the antidotes to the division, fragmentation, reification, and so on that we imagine reigning outside, thereby justifying our disciplinary existence. But if we actually look outside, it is immediately clear that action is no such thing, possesses no such impossible powers, has less to do with art than with politics, politics in the de-idealized, messy sense.

Mulhern accuses the *Kulturkritik* tradition of covert nationalism and cultural studies of incoherent populism. Both charges are reasonable and important, but neither charge can be pinned to the concept of culture. The antisweatshop movement, which does not share our academic dependence on that concept, is saturated with nationalism and populism. How could it not be, given the movement's need to juggle or reconcile the interests of constituencies as different as organized labor, with its history of protectionism, and the so-called constituencies of conscience, with their ethical universalism? This is what politics does. It brings groups together in a common action that will not, cannot, perfectly represent the interests of any of them, that will oppose an antagonist each of them finds scandalous for a slightly different reason—will oppose, in effect, multiple slightly different antagonists.

At the bottom of the *New Yorker* cartoon, three boxes offer three possible facts about the people who made your shirt. In the middle there is an exaggerated clarity: they "earned three cents an hour." To the left, however, there is ambiguity: they "probably have dysentery or diphtheria or worse." This could be another sign of their misery but could also be a reason for our anxiety and disgust (yuck, germs on my shirt!). And to the right is more ambiguity: they "hate your stupid Yankee guts." To which the likely American response is, "In that case, too bad for them." In one box we have fear of foreign infection in the AIDS or Ebola style; in the other we have a national circling of the wagons in the presence of hostility judged childish ("stupid Yankee guts"). In other words, two of the three boxes confirm the strong hint of American nationalism suggested above when the cartoon assumes, or assumes its readers will assume, against all the evidence, that a label reading "Made in USA" guarantees union wages and decent working conditions—in effect, that there are no sweatshops in the United States (a possibility that gets no illustration). Pushing these nationalist buttons no doubt helps Chast prepare for her antiantisweatshop climax. But they are not just her buttons; they are also the antisweatshop movement's buttons.

The history of checking for a "Made in USA" label has recently been recounted in Dana Frank's book *Buy American: The Untold Story of Economic Nationalism*. Frank opens the book by describing what she calls an "import panic attack": "Ms Consumer's epiphany" that "all the goods she had examined" at the local mall "were made in China, Japan, or Korea [. . .] she peered at label after label and discovered to her horror that she couldn't find a TV or a VCR or a toaster made in the U.S.A." What follows is the conclusion that "because people like herself were buying imports, American workers were losing their jobs" (ix).[6] The power of the epiphany, in Frank's analysis, is in direct proportion to the weakness of the logic or rather to the logic's failure to impose an appropriate conclusion, about the causes of the phenomenon or what to do about it. The general reaction in the United States has been to want to buy American, and anti-immigrant racism has never been far away. Epiphanies like these have often led to action, but action of a sublimely confused and nationalist kind, including bashing a Toyota with a sledgehammer and the no less confused act of lobbying Congress to deny normal trade relations to China, thereby claiming a presumptive national virtue for the United States government in the act of refusing it to another government.[7] Once you are attuned to the motif of nationalism, examples are all too easy to come by. Randy Shaw, an activist and a histo-

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rian of activism, entitles his account of the antisweatshop movement *Reclaiming America: Nike, Clean Air, and the New National Activism*. The America Shaw sees the movement trying to reclaim is one that, as recently as the 1970s, was supposedly "moving toward the equitable society envisioned in the ideals of its founders" (1). If you can believe that, then you will have no trouble referring, with ambiguous restrictiveness, to the new *national* activism.

Yet if we drop the requirement that this activism be genuinely internationalist, then Shaw's patriotism has a certain specifically political astuteness. "A Disney spokesman named Green, responding to accusations about conditions in a Haitian factory that produces Disney clothes, shot back at a newspaper reporter: [. . .] 'With the newsprint you use, do you have any idea of the labor conditions involved to produce it?' " (Klein 188). I have little sympathy for Disney or its spokesmen, but the point, however disingenuous, is not irrelevant or uninteresting. How special a case are foreign sweatshops? When Lodge omits the international dimension, talking about the tea kettle but saying nothing about the tea, is he making a significant omission? What precisely is added by the realization that those who work and suffer on Asian tea plantations and in Mexican maquiladoras are not fellow nationals? If the foreignness of the Disney factory in Haiti offers political leverage that is not offered by the production of newsprint, it's in part because of national shame. And there is no national shame without national pride. Can national pride be turned into an ally of internationalism?

Many have suggested before me that national pride can and must and, more generally, that global commitments can emerge more or less organically and continuously only from local, personal, familial commitments. Agreement on this idea is suspiciously easy, yet getting to the next step of the argument—agreeing, say, on a tipping point where continuity switches over into opposition—is much more challenging. Consider, for example, the somewhat risky role in antisweatshop discourse of disease and disgust. People are not worried about the "moral losses" occasioned by their reliance on paid household help, Barbara Ehrenreich speculates in one of her undercover essays on menial labor, because

> [a]lmost everything we buy, after all, is the product of some other person's suffering and miserably underpaid labor. I clean my own house [. . .] but I can hardly claim purity in any other area of consumption. I buy my jeans at The Gap, which is reputed to subcontract to sweatshops. [. . .] We can try to minimize the pain that goes into feeding, clothing, and otherwise provisioning ourselves—by observing boycotts, checking for a union label, etc.—but there is no way to avoid it altogether without living in the wilderness on berries. So why should housework, among all the goods and services we consume, arouse any special angst?[8]

But having paid workers clean one's home does arouse angst, she says, and the reason is that one's home is felt to be different: "Someone who has no qualms about purchasing rugs woven by child slaves in India or coffee picked by impoverished peasants in Guatemala might still hesitate to tell dinner guests that, surprisingly enough, his or her lovely home doubles as a sweatshop during the day" ("Maid" 69). It is not the simple existence of sweatshops but seeing your home as a sweatshop that offers a political hold. The Orwellian disgust that makes something seem actionably political in the household is akin to the disgust that makes us squeamish about something foreign suffusing our shirts, our breakfasts, our most intimate space. It's fine if I know it's happening, as long as it's not happening right here. This is the slogan of the NIMBY movements: not in my backyard. Once you think about it, the disgust is itself a bit disgusting. Yet one asks oneself whether there can be any politics without it—without a provisional reinforcing of borders and hierarchies, privileges and property lines that we know to be more or less illegitimate.

The "moral challenge," Ehrenreich concludes,

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> is to make work visible again: not only the scrubbing and vacuuming but all the hoeing, stacking, hammering, drilling, bending, and lifting that goes into creating and maintaining a livable habitat. In an ever more economically unequal culture, where so many of the affluent devote their lives to such ghostly pursuits as stock-trading, image-making, and opinion-polling, real work—in the old-fashioned sense of labor that engages the hand as well as the eye, that tires the body and directly alters the physical world—tends to vanish from sight. (70)

Hoeing, stacking, and hammering, like Lodge's list of labors in *Nice Work*, belong to the argument that a "livable habitat" depends on a great many kinds of work that are normally invisible. But as the culmination of an argument about who cleans the toilets and mops the floors at home, the seemingly innocuous demand to make work visible also makes a riskier suggestion, a suggestion that might paradoxically work against this perception of interdependence. To refuse the division of labor at a point of intimacy is to flirt with refusing the division of labor as such. When Ehrenreich contrasts "real" work at home with such "ghostly" sorts of nonmanual labor as "opinion-polling," she inadvertently does just what the ideology of the work ethic does: assuming a criterion of individual self-reliance and self-sufficiency. If it is disgusting to have someone do manual labor in our house, if within our own four walls at least we should be sturdily independent of the work of others, then how can we keep the desire for sturdy independence from spilling over and generalizing itself? Are we prepared to deny our dependence, for example, on such ghostly forms of nonmanual labor as planning rational traffic patterns, collecting opinions on behalf of national health care, or teaching at public universities? The work ethic protects and legitimates the system of individual rewards: it suggests to people, falsely, that they've earned what they receive, that they receive what they receive because of their individual labors. In other words, it blots out the existence of society and the interdependence without which no individual effort could lead to any results, let alone any reward. Whatever else it does, the sweatshop sublime rightly forces on us the knowledge of social interdependence. Ehrenreich, perhaps because she feels the pain of this knowledge more acutely than most, tries to escape it by imagining the home as an enclave of hardworking self-sufficiency. If the home is a pattern—and her essay's arc from housework to manual labor as such suggests exactly that—then the appreciation of "real" work can easily become (as it so often has in recent public discourse) an argument against the hard-won sense of interdependence, and the ethical conclusions drawn from interdependence, that has made possible voter support for the little we have left of the social welfare state.

In other words, disgust with dependence on the work of other people in the home risks passing over into disgust with dependence on the work of other people in general—a disgust with being part of a highly elaborated division of labor. Yet learning to be part of that division is a precondition for almost any progressive politics, nationally and internationally. And it would seem to demand—on the as yet counterfactual but urgent condition that everyone receive proper wages and benefits—that we unlearn our desire that other people get out of our most intimate space: our shirt, our morning coffee. The social division of labor of course naturalizes and disguises social inequality. But that is not all it does. Not so long ago, poverty was seen as an individual moral failing. More recently, it seemed unnatural and unethical for mothers who had any choice in the matter to put their children in the care of state-sponsored day care centers. To the extent that these beliefs are no longer held and that our society has begun to act on the welfare state's assumption of no-fault poverty, we have taken some deep ethical lessons from the division of labor. Ceasing to be scandalized by paid work in our homes may eventually have to be one of those lessons.

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What exactly is the scandal about sweatshops? Naomi Klein, the author of a best-selling book on the antisweatshop movement, *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies*, argues that the key to contemporary injustice is brand names: "The astronomical growth in the wealth and cultural influence of multinational corporations over the last fifteen years can arguably be traced back to a single, seemingly innocuous idea developed by management theorists in the mid-1980s: that successful corporations must primarily produce brands, as opposed to products" (3). This not unfamiliar but questionable premise allows her to intensify the sense of scandal around the all-too-substantial sweatshop labor that goes into these strangely insubstantial commodities. Such intensity has been a major political resource of the movement; the outrage against transnational corporations is special when they can be presented as a "global logo web," when there is "high name-brand recognition" (xviii). Note what assumptions this argument involves. Capitalists are "abandoning," Klein writes, "their traditional role as direct, secure employers to pursue their branding dreams" (441). Direct, secure employers? It would be news to workers laid off or fearing layoffs long before the logo takeoff of the 1980s that the "traditional role" of capitalists was to offer security of employment. It's as if what Engels found in Manchester in 1844 were the good old days. Klein's insistence that the real problem is brands means she has to overvalue the "old-fashioned idea that a manufacturer is responsible for its own workforce" (187).

This is indeed a very old-fashioned idea. It is old enough to reproduce that "organic conception, stressing interrelation and interdependence," whose opposition to crude laissez-faire Williams termed "one of the most important facts about English social thinking in the nineteenth century" (140). It's a bit surprising to find something so close to Eliot's ethic of service and top-down solicitude, to the forthright paternalism of Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (Lodge's model in *Nice Work*), reappearing now in the most up-to-date antisweatshop discourse. But it is not, I think, an absolute mistake. "As frustrating and irrational as it is," Shaw writes, "the stance that 'all corporations are evil so there's nothing to be done' has been a remarkably effective rationalization for inaction in the face of injustice" (21). This is the commonsense version of "Everything is political," and it too leaves people thinking, "In that case, nothing is political, and so why bother?" A relative, compromised criterion will have to be posited according to which some corporations are less evil than others, or else inaction will triumph. The willingness to accept, for rhetorical purposes, the somewhat mythic figure of the responsible employer offering secure employment makes sense as a way of opening up the landscape to action.

This is a backhanded case for the continued political relevance of the culture-and-society tradition, which turns up unexpectedly in the middle of today's timeliest discourse of political action. It is also a case for understanding action in a less theological sense, a sense that is not irreconcilable with the humble acknowledgment that (as novelists like Lodge and Eliot have suggested) those who want to understand the world are not thereby privileged to stand outside and against the division of labor. If action is as politically confused and promiscuous as Mulhern says culture is, then action cannot serve scholars and critics of culture as a repository and arbiter of virtue. And the attempt to make it so serve is politically counterproductive for academics in that the effort can only appear to potential allies as a claim to moral superiority. To call on ourselves to aim our work at action or activism is to imply that we can have the singular good fortune to live, even potentially, a fusion of high moral principles with the universal need to make a living, a fusion that ordinary people hardly dare dream of. Listening in on this call to responsibility, the general population is likely to hear only another form of elitism. When we need allies, and we do need allies—for example, to defend the dignity of our work against its

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reduction to the logic of the bottom line—we will thus have reason to expect more resentment than solidarity. If action is what we want, then "Action!" is not the motto we want.

I have been arguing against the sort of self-aggrandizement that often hides out in calls to activist responsibility, not against responsibility itself. In pointing out that moments of insight like ours into the distant workings of the world are more ordinary than we like to think and that the weight of confusions, ambiguities, and other responsibilities that keeps ordinary people from acting on such moments is more characteristic of us than we like to think, I've been trying to give a more modest and more accurate sense, but not a less binding one, of what our responsibilities are. That even action against sweatshops must take place in a muddled zone where it's difficult to distinguish principled internationalism from scary nationalism can stand as one piece of evidence of the need for us scholars and critics not to step out of character. On the contrary, we should take up our responsibilities in the workplace, exercise our most rigorous, academically trained powers of analytic discrimination. As far as action is concerned, there is always the imperative to do some institutional housecleaning—that is, to do what we can to ensure that we do not work in universities, libraries, museums, and other cultural institutions that for many of our colleagues function, as those institutions are under more and more pressure to function, like intellectual sweatshops.[9]

I began this essay by speaking about the division of labor and suggesting that the effort to perceive one's place in it offers a contemporary experience of the sublime. The critic most associated with this suggestion is Fredric Jameson. Indeed, Jameson is criticized on just this point by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*. "It should [. . .] be clear," Spivak says, "that Jameson's fable about unrepresentable technology leading to a (generally unsatisfactory) paranoid social practice, a (satisfactory if correctly understood) schizophrenic aesthetic practice, and cognitive (not 'moral') political practice, is not a complete rupture with Kant's Analytic of the Sublime" (325). To put this more crudely: in the face of global capital, Jameson fails to imagine any satisfactory politics and offers instead the compensatory satisfactions, such as they are, of cognitive and above all aesthetic practice.

If this is true, there are extenuating circumstances. Among them is the difficulty of arriving at anything like a satisfactory politics under present global conditions—a shared difficulty. When heavy industry moves from Manchester and Milwaukee to Mexico and Malaysia, the map of political possibilities becomes more complicated for Mexicans and Malaysians as well. The complications are different, but people of various nations share the challenge of seeing, speaking, and acting transnationally. Expertise in cognitive and aesthetic practice can properly claim to be of use here, even of significance.

In the final chapter of *Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson concedes that the word *reification*, understood as "the transformation of social relations into things," "probably directs attention in the wrong direction for us today." He sees more relevance in a second definition of the word:

> "the effacement of the traces of production" from the object itself, from the commodity thereby produced. This sees the matter from the standpoint of the consumer: it suggests the kind of guilt people are freed from if they are able not to remember the work that went into their toys and furnishings. Indeed, the point of having your own object world, and walls and muffled distance or relative silence all around you, is to forget about all those innumerable others for a while; you don't want to have to think about Third World women every time you pull yourself up to your word processor, or all the other lower-class people with their lower-class lives when you decide to use or consume your other luxury products: it would be like having voices inside your head.[10]

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The paragraph that immediately follows, however, makes the opposite point and makes it about art: "The reification of culture itself is evidently a somewhat different matter, since those products are 'signed'; nor, in consuming culture, do we particularly want, let alone need, to forget the human producer" (315). This frank admission changes everything. If in the case of art we don't need to forget the human producer, if we actively desire to remember the human producer, if we want to see traces of production, indeed will pay good money to have those voices echoing in our heads, then why mightn't we go on to want the same thing with other products as well, products that are not classified as art? The Lodge and Chast texts I've been discussing, taken together with the successes of antisweatshop campaigns based unapologetically in the psychology and ethics of the consumer, offer evidence that consumers don't come in two entirely distinct types, one artistic and the other unartistic—that there exists, in other words, a certain desire to live with voices inside our heads. This desire, not exclusive to intellectuals contemplating works of art, seems to mark a certain political possibility in the humanities. There are certainly less feasible and less consequential goals for humanistic education than the cultivating, augmenting, and channeling of the desire for voices inside our heads. There are also worse ways of thinking about political action in the narrow sense.

Curiously, sublimity and sweatshops turn up together again on the back cover of Spivak's *Critique*, which tells us that the book "ranges from Kant's analytic of the sublime to child labor in Bangladesh." This range is not quite so wide as Harvard University Press appears to think, for the discussion of the sublime in chapter 1 and the discussion of child labor in the conclusion are versions of the same argument. Questioning the "interested use of 'child labor' as a way of blocking export from developing countries" (416), Spivak accuses antisweatshop activists who call for boycotts against the Bangladeshi garment industry of blindly helping to protect northern jobs and markets (415). "The transnationally illiterate benevolent feminist of the North supports this [boycotting] wholeheartedly, with 'ignorant goodwill' " (416).[11] The ignorant goodwill of northern progressives is also the theme of the philosophy chapter, which treats the figure of the aboriginal in Kant. So-called "New Hollanders" and "inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego [. . .] bubble up in the cauldron of Kant's contempt," as Spivak nicely puts it, because Kant needs examples of "man in the raw," man lacking in culture and therefore unable to appreciate the sublime (26, 28n). Only those lacking in culture will allow Kant to define the process by which culture can manufacture a rational subject, which offers in turn "a justification for Europe to be the global legislator" (32–33). Kant's "global project for the subject [. . .] of reason" is "the project of transforming [the New Hollander and the Fuegan] from the raw to the philosophical" (36).

According to Spivak, Kant's analytic of the sublime does the same thing that Western human rights discourse does when addressed to Bangladeshi sweatshops: it flattens out the complexity and difference of Third World society to suit a First World standard of ethical rationality. But it is unclear that Kant was always and everywhere committed to that standard. He turns to the aesthetic in his *Critique of Judgment*, as I suggested hastily above, not because he wants to defend rationality but because he can see that the rational community he desires will never come about by means of submission to rationality. People must be induced or cajoled by other means to bind themselves together. They are more likely to do so, he speculated, through their uncoerced and individual yet also universalizing act of appreciating the beautiful than through their rational obedience to the good. In other words, Kant's aesthetics can be read as his political theory, a theory rendered necessary by the political insufficiencies of reason. According to this view, Kant says that political action has to take on the limits and confusions of the

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aesthetic. For if it does not, if it attempts to embody and enact reason, it risks producing effects that are rationally and ethically undesirable.

This alternative account of Kantian sublimity supports Spivak's argument concerning political action against Asian sweatshops and shows how broadly she agrees with Jameson. What Spivak complains about, in northern antisweatshop campaigns, is the simplification of action whereby "the only imperative—'What You Can Do in India'—is boycotts and sanctions" (418n). In calling for resistance to sweatshops accompanied by long-term "infrastructural followup" (420), Spivak tries, one might say, to theorize a politics in which northerners have to forgo the illusory satisfactions of immediate action in a domain of ostensible political transparency and ethical universality. Like Jameson, she writes in or near the mode of the Kantian sublime. She insists that constraints, obscurities, hesitations, and self-questionings, the inevitable by-products of capitalism in its global mode, must be factored back into the tempting simplicity of action, a simplicity that as she points out has not become less treacherous in the epoch of humanitarian intervention and human rights. This sinking back into ourselves is what politics requires, even and especially on a global scale. Of course, this sinking back also confirms the emotional satisfaction we derive from intellectual work in all its lonely specificity, the slow and patient labor of filling in the steps, analytically and politically, between the perceptual and emotional jolt and the outlet in action that may or may not be found to suit it. If public intellectuals are to pursue something higher than publicity, this continuing communion with privacy is an inescapable part of their task.

Notes

[1] I owe the Baudelaire reference (from "L'invitation au voyage") to Fisher (133).

[2] Apropos of this sinking back, Shapiro finds in both the Burkean and the Kantian sublime "a dual structure of communication and the possibility of withdrawal which constitutes society" (219). Arac argues that this valued moment when our usual categories break down and we find ourselves suddenly defenseless in the face of the new is also about the paradoxical comforts of nonrealization.

[3] Dorothea's direct dependence on these working people is not really clarified by this passage, which does not capture them in productive labor or state, like the Lodge passage, that without their labor she would not enjoy goods, clothing, or shelter.

[4] As a female member of the landed gentry, Dorothea is neither expected nor permitted to work for a living; she lives purely in the domain of consumption. This passage can thus also be construed as her revolt against her exclusion from the domain of production.

[5] Emile Durkheim, who looked more favorably on the division of labor than the culture-and-society tradition did, nevertheless joined with that tradition in defining the role of the intellectual in relation to the division of labor. As Parkin writes, "Durkheim placed a lot of faith in people's willingness to bear burdens provided they could see themselves as part of some meaningful and just design. His entire theory of the division of labour as the basis of solidarity depended upon the general readiness to make such a connection. If individuals saw their daily toil in isolation, rather than as one important element in a purposeful whole, social solidarity would be sabotaged by the division of labour" (64–65). We are rescued from fragmentation only by consciousness of the whole, and intellectuals specialize in providing this consciousness.

It is perhaps worth noting here that the division of labor, while responsible of course for the disguising of systematic economic inequality, is also responsible for the beginnings of a positive attitude toward social difference: "Different kinds of different human beings appeared to be able to live harmoniously with each other. Indeed, it became possible to *define* a society as the harmonious interplay of very different kinds of human beings living very different kinds of lives without the social whole dissolving into chaos. It takes something like a leap of the imagination to grasp the difference between the old view and the new. The new view meant that differences between men were socially integrative. The old view that a society was better the more its members were the same was simply overturned" (McClelland 433).

[6] Note the toaster, an American equivalent to Lodge's British electric tea kettle.

[7] As Moody notes, "[T]he campaign against PNTR status for China [was] really about the fear of rising, ever-cheaper imports, not human rights." He goes on: "There is also more than a little hypocrisy in singling out China's labor rights record with its implication that labor rights in the United States—or Mexico, or South Korea—are some sort of model. [. . .] Finally, there is the fact that focusing exclusively on China brings out the jingo and the cold war-

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rior still under the skin of many labor leaders. This was exemplified by Teamster President Jimmy Hoffa, who invited Pat Buchanan to speak at a Teamster rally [. . .]" ("Protectionism" 36). See also Moody, "Global Capital."

[8] See also Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed*. Her insistence on the working, cleaning body can be balanced by Ann Cvetkovich's analysis of sweatshop rhetoric in Marx's *Capital*. Cvetkovich sees Marx using the sensationalism of the suffering body even as his analysis demonstrates that the suffering body is not the key to capital's working (165–97).

[9] This will mean after-hours work; it can't be the content of our teaching and writing.

[10] The passage continues: "indeed, it 'violates' the intimate space of your privacy and your extended body. For a society that wants to forget about class, therefore, reification in this consumer-packaging sense is very functional indeed" (314–15).

[11] Spivak seems to think the sort of subject represented by contemporary feminists, and the sort of subject contemporary feminists seek to produce, resembles Jane Eyre in having a missionary zeal to act, even when action involves the objectification of the Third World woman. For better or worse, I don't think this is accurate. The teaching of culture can certainly politicize, but the consciousness it produces is more likely to be unhappy. If we collectively can be said to teach commitment, we also teach hesitation.

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