

THE DIALECTICAL CO-CONSTITUTION OF WORK AND ART

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I don't see a duality or wide degree of separation between work and art. Work itself can be an outlet for artistic expression, and artistry takes work. Most workers express themselves during their free time through one means or another, whether it be through gardening, cabinet making, wood carving, building things, playing music, storytelling, or what-have-you. Hobbies can be a form of artistic expression, whether or not they rise to the level of being an artform.

—Hobe Kytr, historian and fisherpoet

This chapter builds on sociological theories of division of labor to argue that work and art are both co-constitutive and dialectical. The historical separation of work and art produces a dualism, with work coded as material, economic, and productive, and art coded as symbolic, expressive, and nonproductive. This dualism is reinforced through modern divisions of labor, cultural institutions, and market structures that treat artistic and productive labor as fundamentally different kinds of activity. Even within contemporary sociological thought, this dualism persists. I propose that between that separation and the lived experience of work and artmaking, there exists a dynamic tension—a dialectic process—that is reconfigured across time. Based on ethnographic observations on “fisherpoets”—commercial fishermen who create art about their work and lives—and textual analysis of their artworks, I argue that work and art do not preexist as fully formed entities but take shape through their ongoing interaction. Each sphere is shaped, organized, and given meaning through its relation to the other.

In this chapter, I argue that work and art are dialectically co-constituted through labor regimes: the material, temporal, and social organization of work generates specific forms of cultural production, which in turn reshape how labor is lived. By situating my argument within broader twenty-first-century labor transformations—e.g. precarity, polyoccupationalism, and

automation—I offer this model not just for the case of fisherpoets, but as a broader analytic for exploring laboring identities across occupations, from farmers to physicians.

Beyond the Division of Labor

For the founders of sociology—Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim—few events had a more significant impact on the development of Western societies than the Industrial Revolution. Simultaneously with industrialization came the troubling forces of modernization, urbanization, secularization, and capitalism. For these thinkers, how human beings would live and work in modern societies was therefore a common concern. Work, to which human beings will give over no small share of their time, continues to provide sociologists with empirical puzzles, and many of the theoretical concepts that formulate these studies can be attributed to Marx, Weber, and Durkheim. *Division of labor* is one of these core concepts that sociologists—especially those who study work—still owe to the thinkers.

Taken in its most generalizable sociological definition, division of labor refers to the range of tasks performed in a society. A society with a low division of labor might look like a group of people who perform a small range of tasks, which they may do in common: for instance, an agricultural community in which most people are engaged in the similar task of sustenance farming. A society with a high division of labor might look more familiar to a Western reader: a group of people who perform a wide range of tasks, with individuals usually having a particular specialization. In this society, tasks can be separated into innumerable other tasks. A doctor’s job is not simply “doctor,” but neurologist, cardiologist, radiologist, or the list goes on. Which society functions better: the one with a lower or higher degree of division of labor? The obvious answer is that it depends hugely on what one means by “better.” However,

for sake of argument, I suggest that a “better-functioning” society is that which is more humane and livable for more people. Now the question points to other possible answers. Maybe what matters is not the degree of division of labor, but how division of labor structures human activity, or the context within which this division occurs. It becomes apparent that division of labor cannot be easily taken as “good” or “bad,” and having inherently positive or negative effects for society. Moreover, it suggests that symbolic separations between artistic and productive labor cannot be taken as natural or for granted.

Marx, Weber, and Durkheim themselves disagreed in their writings about division of labor and its potential benefits or ills. Marx and Durkheim, in particular, pose an interesting case for comparison, because their ideas about division of labor differed starkly. It would not be going too far to call their theories diametrically opposed to each other, with Marx looking at division of labor with severe skepticism, on one hand, and Durkheim seeing it optimistically, on the other. In this section, I place Marx and Durkheim in analytic tension—not to reconcile their opposing theories of division of labor, but to clarify the limits of each and open conceptual space for a different understanding of how labor structures cultural production.

Marx on Division of Labor

“The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles” (Marx and Engels 1978:473). This line from Marx’s *Manifesto of the Communist Party* is often quoted, but it bears repeating here to establish one thing from the start: Marx held a view that “society” does not exist, as such. Rather, what one thinks of as society in any given time and place is, always and in every epoch to date, an arrangement of people into a class order that manifests antagonism. Although revolutionary events may unfold that precipitate a reordering of the

particulars of this arrangement, this fundamental class antagonism remains: in every society there is an oppressor class and an oppressed class, dominator and dominated. Hence, in any epoch, society is merely a reflection of the lives, means, and ideologies of the dominant, ruling class.

For Marx, born in Germany in 1818, the Industrial Revolution was the epoch-defining event that fueled many of his writings. Like other periods of upheaval before it, industrialization led to a revolutionary reordering of people, but it could not do away with the fundamental class antagonism—that between oppressor and oppressed. Far from it. Instead, Marx stated, it merely “established new classes, new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle in place of the old ones” (p. 474). In different epochs, Marx saw the same antagonism assuming different forms. Further, with each new epoch and every new reordering of the class system—from serfdom, to feudalism, to modern industry—Marx saw this antagonism as becoming simpler, sharper. In no prior epoch did Marx see this class antagonism as more polarizing than in modern industry.

To read Marx correctly here, it is necessary to understand his conception of history. Marx considered all history as deriving from materiality; the actual conditions under which people live, their modes of life and production. Therefore, capitalism did not arise spontaneously; nor was it born out of an abstract realm of ideas. Capitalism, and the economic conditions it brought, were produced by humans, through their daily activities. Thus, in Marx’s Europe, the seeds of capitalism were not sown during the Industrial Revolution, but before it, only developing fully into capitalism with the dawn of industry.

In the industrial turn of the century, Marx saw division of labor as highly developed, and the growing class antagonism as sharper than ever before. Yet when industry and commerce were established on a large scale, drawing more and more nations into competitive struggle, Marx saw

that “the permanence of the acquired productive forces [was] assured” (p. 180). Capitalism had a firm foothold. In *Wage Labor and Capital*, Marx described this unstoppable acceleration of capitalism as follows: “The more productive capital grows, the more the division of labor¹ and the application of machinery expands. The more the division of labor and the application of machinery expands, the more competition among the workers expands and the more their wages contract” (p. 216). In this passage, Marx was outlining the principles of competition, which drive capital owners to lower wages, over and over again, further entrenching the worker in the subordination of his own labor. What is crucial here is that division of labor, for Marx, is both an organizing principle and the mechanism through which labor becomes fragmented and subordinated. According to Marx:

The division of labor implies from the outset the division of the conditions of labor, of tools and materials, and thus the splitting-up of accumulated capital among different owners, and thus, also, the division between capital and labor, and the different forms of property itself. The more the division of labor develops and accumulation grows, the sharper are the forms that this process of differentiation assumes. *Labor itself can only exist on the premise of this fragmentation.* (p. 190, emphasis added)

Here, Marx asserts that labor can only ever exist in relation to class struggle. In this formulation, labor is defined negatively—by fragmentation, coercion, and subordination—rather than as a site of expressive or creative self-realization. Moreover, the last line shows that labor for Marx is defined *in relation to itself*. But also in relation to division of labor, which has already been argued to achieve an advanced state under capitalism, which has subsumed the worker. If a man’s work was not forced upon him, it would no longer be considered labor, but something else: free, conscious self-activity, which Marx saw as possible only in a communist society.

¹ Tucker’s edition of *The Marx-Engels Reader* utilizes British English spellings. For stylistic consistency, I have replaced instances of the word “labour” with the American English spelling “labor” when quoting from the Reader.

Hence, it is not a stretch to conclude that Marx was more than deeply suspicious about division of labor. Instead, Marx saw division of labor as one of the most dangerous ills to be brought by industrialism. What effect does this have on the worker? For Marx, the answer is that labor becomes estranged, and the worker in turn, is “alienated, dispossessed, sold” (p. 292). In his writings, Marx described four types of alienation: (1) alienation of the worker from the product of labor; (2) alienation of the worker from the process of production; (3) alienation of man from his human essence or species-being; and (4) alienation of man from man. In the first of these—alienation of the worker from the product of labor—it is necessary to remember that Marx saw all of history as derived from the material world, the world made by men, a world of objects. Yet Marx saw division of labor as devaluing this material world, making men a slave to objects, which they fetishize and seek to accumulate. Accordingly, Marx did not approve of the objects that labor produces. Labor, which is external to man, can only produce objects that are alien to him.

This gives rise to the second type of alienation—alienation of the worker from the process of production. In this type, the worker’s estrangement from the products of his labor is experienced in relation also to the process of labor itself. As the previous section has shown, labor can only exist in a subordinated form—labor for Marx is external, coerced, forced. Under capitalism, this subservient labor becomes a means to satisfy external needs; it is not the worker’s own. Thus, Marx wrote: “If the product of labor is alienation, production itself must be active alienation, the alienation of activity, the activity of alienation” (p. 74).

Since labor only serves to satisfy man’s external needs (if even this), the third type of alienation takes the form of estrangement from man’s species-being; that is, from his own self, the very essence of his being. It is from one’s species-being that Marx saw all conscious, creative

life activity arising. Thus, alienated from his own consciousness, man easily adopts “false consciousness,” denying his essential being and the core of his individual existence.

Finally, there is the fourth type: alienation of man from other men. The man who is estranged from himself is necessarily estranged from other men—for what kind of real relationship is possible between self-estranged men, in an estranged world of commodities? With this type of alienation, people interact with each other in accordance with his class and the property he owns, not on account of his species-being. Unfortunately for Marx, this last type of estrangement among men forms a huge impediment to forging the solidarity Marx saw as needed among workers to take revolutionary action and overthrow the bourgeoisie.

On the subject of revolutionary action (or lack of), Marx described yet another form of division of labor that informs an understanding of why capitalism persists. That is, a division between mental and material labor. For Marx, this particular division constituted an antagonism, this time among members of the ruling class. With the division of mental and material labor—a separation between thinking and doing,

...one part appears as the thinkers of the class (its active, conceptive ideologists, who make the perfecting of the illusion of the class about itself their chief source of livelihood), while the others’ attitude to these ideas and illusions is more passive and receptive, because they are in reality the active members of this class and have less time to make up illusions and ideas about themselves. (p. 173)

Therefore, division of labor is also a precursor for ideology. In Marx’s understanding, in every form of class struggle, the class in possession of the material means of production is as well in possession of the means of mental production. This observation led him to write that “the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas” (p. 172). The separation of mental from material labor—the distinction between thinking and doing—is for Marx a distinction that underwrites modern conceptions of art as separate from productive work. Elsewhere Marx wrote

that the material conditions of one's class also form one's consciousness. Therefore, in a society defined by highly developed division of labor, a further division between mental and material labor allowed for the use of bourgeois ideology to effectively uphold the status quo. As the above passage shows, ideology creates a hegemony, which acts almost invisibly, even to large swathes of the bourgeoisie. The proletariat, subsumed in hegemony and steeped in bourgeois ideology, has formed a false consciousness.

As this analysis has shown, division of labor is both a precondition for and a product of capitalism. As Marx wrote, "For as soon as the distribution of labor comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, a fisherman, a shepherd, or a critical critic, and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood...." (p. 160). But in the promise of communism, Marx foresaw an alternative. The kind of work that Marx saw as possible in the *absence* of division of labor, was not labor, but conscious self-activity; free, creative work, aligned with one's species being. Providing a stark contrast to the image above, Marx wrote:

[I]n communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic. (p. 160)

In this passage, Marx described what work promised to look like in the absence of division of labor. Yet nothing short of a proletariat revolution would result in the overthrow of capitalism. On this point, Marx saw as inevitable a revolution that would pave the way for communism—when and only when the proletariat throws off false consciousness and becomes a class for itself, overthrowing the bourgeoisie. Yet, Marx knew, "the existence of revolutionary ideas in a

particular period presupposes the existence of a revolutionary class,” (p. 173)—and until that time comes, division of labor remains, giving rise to various kinds of alienation.

Marx imagines the collapse of the division of labor—and with it, the collapse of the work/art separation—under communism, where conscious self-activity replaces coerced labor. Yet my ethnographic research suggests that partial reorganizations of this separation can occur *within* capitalism itself. Fisherpoets do not transcend the division of labor; they remain embedded within it. But through artistic production, they reconfigure its constraints, reshaping how labor is narrated and experienced, and challenging labor as an alienated practice.

Durkheim on Division of Labor

Durkheim published his doctoral dissertation and first major work, *The Division of Labor in Society*, in 1893, a generation after Marx. Although Durkheim was clearly influenced by Marx, the two held some fundamentally opposite views. For one, it is important to establish from the start that, contrary to Marx who took a critical view of society as the material manifestation of class antagonism, Durkheim held a more positivist view of society as a “social fact;” that is, society as something that exists, *sui generis*. Society for him is a phenomenon formed outside the consciousness of individuals, yet one capable of exerting its power over humans and their social relations (Durkheim 2013, pp. 25, 38, 190). Therefore, not only does society exist for Durkheim, as such; it also serves an indispensable social function.

In the absence of society, Durkheim was certain that humans, falling back on their “nature,” would become violent, aggressive, and unethical in their actions. A strong society was necessary to combat humans’ baser nature, provide order, and protect against the ills of modern life. These ills were: normlessness, the weakening of moral values, both leading to *anomie*.

Durkheim's concept of anomie, not unlike Marx's alienation, referred to social instability, a kind of individual and collective unrest stemming from a breakdown of values in society. Durkheim's prescribed antidote was social integration, or solidarity.²

To Durkheim's mind, people have "ways of acting, thinking and feeling which possess the remarkable property of existing outside the consciousness of the individual" (p. 20).

However, society does not impart these ways of thinking and acting to the individual through brute force, as in Marx's interpretation. For Durkheim, the process is one of socialization. It is "the pressure itself of the social environment" that shapes people in it (p. 23). Indeed, from the first assertion, it is clear that Marx and Durkheim differed in their basic assumptions about human beings and the social world. Before continuing with this comparison, however, I will focus on Durkheim's perspective of division of labor, and hence, his concept of solidarity.

Durkheim observed two kinds of solidarity at work across the various ancient and modern societies: mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity. In each, Durkheim observed a lesser or greater development of division of labor. I will next consider each type of solidarity in turn.

Durkheim described mechanical solidarity as that which occurs in traditional, smaller, in some ways "simpler" societies—those in which association among people was based on kinship—such as tribes. In such societies, Durkheim observed an *undeveloped* division of labor, but typically, a highly developed punitive system. This led Durkheim (1984) to write about crime and its legal repercussions in tribal societies, as a heuristic to illustrate how mechanical solidarity works. Under mechanical solidarity, crime—followed by severe punishment of the group—served to produce and maintain the group's social bond, its "collective consciousness" (p. 67).

Without the occasional violations of crime, Durkheim believed that this collective consciousness

² A concept coined by Marx in reference to *class* solidarity, the word took on a more general meaning for Durkheim, who used it in reference to the many various groupings among people within society.

and social bond would wither, making society weak. Thus, punitiveness served to strengthen and reinforce mechanical solidarity. Indeed, Durkheim wrote, “the bond of social solidarity to which repressive law corresponds is one the breaking of which constitutes the crime” (p. 57).

Organic solidarity, by contrast, was typical for Durkheim of modern and industrial societies, existing with and *as a result of* specialization of work. Put differently, organic solidarity *requires* the division of labor of society. As Durkheim wrote:

[O]n the one hand each one of us depends more intimately upon society the more labor is divided up, and on the other, the activity of each one of us is correspondingly more specialized, the more personal it is.... Here, then, the individuality of the whole grows at the same time as that of the parts. Society becomes more effective in moving in concert, at the same time as each of its elements has more movements that are peculiarly its own. (p. 102)

Here articulated, organic solidarity is “possible only in so far as the individual personality is absorbed into the collective personality” (p. 102). In other words, a society in which people perform different tasks leads to social interdependence among individuals, who are members of a collective. It becomes clear that Durkheim sees division of labor not as a negative force—not even as a necessary evil—but as serving an important and benevolent function. And yet, is division of labor enough on its own to produce and maintain organic solidarity in a society? If punitiveness was thought to strengthen the bonds of collective consciousness in tribal societies, what for Durkheim serves to strengthen and support the bonds of interdependence in modern societies? On this note, Durkheim asserted the importance and need for socializing bodies—occupational groups, school groups, religious groups, and the like—to strengthen the integration of individuals into groups, reduce *anomie*, and promote the overall moral integration of society.

As this serves to make clear, Durkheim held the perspective that a society cannot function well if its individual members are not integrated within a collectivity. This thinking forms the

basis of Durkheim's concept of society as an organic holism. A helpful metaphor for understanding this concept is to consider a healthy human body, in which every organ is functioning as it should to maintain a balanced equilibrium. In Durkheim's words:

These [societies] are constituted, not by the replication of similar homogenous elements, but by a system of different organs, each one of which has a special role and which themselves are formed from differentiated parts. They are neither placed together end-on...nor embedded in one another, but coordinated and subordinated to one another around the same central organ. (p. 143)

Thus, in a healthy-functioning society, the totality of heterogenous elements (organs)—centered around the same central organ (society)—constitutes organic holism. In terms of division of labor, then, the greater the division of labor, the greater the interdependence among people, and the healthier is the functioning of society. And what becomes of the individual in modern societies with highly developed division of labor? On this question, Durkheim was criticized by contemporaries, who read him as undermining the autonomy and uniqueness of the individual. In his later writings, he offered a caveat, however: Individuals, Durkheim (2013) suggested, “adapt themselves differently to an identical physical environment,” (p. 17). Therefore:

Despite the fact that beliefs and social practices permeate us in this way from the outside, it does not follow that we receive them passively and without causing them to undergo modification. In thinking about collective institutions, in assimilating ourselves to them, we individualize them, we more or less impart to them our own personal stamp. (p. 16)

Here, Durkheim can be interpreted as saying that humans should be socialized *enough* into society so as to temper their baser natures, yet not socialized *too much* so as to suppress their development as individual, autonomous selves.

Durkheim's perspective on division of labor—that it develops strong interdependence, leading to organic solidarity—seems to paint an almost cheery picture of modern society. However, it is important to note that Durkheim was, at the time he was writing, trying to

establish sociology as an empirical social science. Needless to point out, Durkheim *was* writing with open eyes. In the context of industrialization, urbanization, and secularization, Durkheim (1984) could not deny that society was not functioning as it should; as he put it, “the crisis from which we are suffering does not stem from one single, unique cause” (p. 28).

Durkheim’s account of specialization thus reinforces the differentiation of social roles as both necessary and functional. Yet, the same structural specialization that produces interdependence also sharpens the symbolic separation between forms of labor—between manual and intellectual, productive and expressive. In modern societies, this differentiation solidifies the work/art dualism as a taken-for-granted feature of social organization. It is precisely this differentiation that fisherpoets unsettle. By engaging in artistic production from within a highly specialized occupational field, they expose the instability of the presumed boundary between work and art.

Taken together, Marx and Durkheim offer contrasting yet incomplete accounts of division of labor. For Marx, specialization fragments and alienates; for Durkheim, it integrates and stabilizes. Yet, neither theorizes how cultural production—more specifically, artistic activity—arises from and in relation to labor.

Mutually Shaping Practices

In previous chapters, I illustrate the following empirical argument: in fishing occupations, work shapes art, art reshapes and gives meaning to work, and under certain conditions, art can become a form of praxis with the aim of transforming the conditions of labor itself. In this way, I think of work and art as co-constitutive: Neither exists as fully formed prior to their interaction. Instead, they are historically and dynamically intertwined practices that emerge through an

ongoing process. Labor generates the material and affective conditions for cultural production, while cultural production in turn reconfigures the meaning, value, identities, and lived experiences of labor.

Consider the case of American whalers: Whalers were embedded in an early industrial labor regime marked by long voyages, rigid hierarchies, low pay, and extreme physical risk. Within this regime, artistic practices—illustrated journals, poetry and verse, scrimshaw, sea shanties—emerged not as separate leisure pursuits, but as practices woven into the rhythms of work itself. Art was often produced in the interstices of work time using the modest materials whalers had on board. Yet this artistic production did not resist domination or exploitation. Instead, it reproduced it, through narratives and visuals that reflected colonialist and imperialist logics of the occupation. Art depicted whales, and the natural world, as objects to be mastered. In this early industrial context, art functioned less as overt critique and more as instrumental and narrative documentation. In this case, work generated the conditions for art: long voyages, cramped quarters, the violence of the whale hunt, encounters with Indigenous populations. Art, in turn, reshaped the meaning of work, while failing to transform its structural conditions—arguably, to the industry's demise.

Fisherpoets, by contrast, operate within a late twentieth- and twenty-first-century labor regime characterized by increasing economic and ecological precarity. Unlike whalers, contemporary commercial fishermen return home between seasons; they share their art in festivals, chapbooks, and anthologies. Through the FisherPoets Gathering—an annual event where fisherpoets publicly share their poetry and artworks—they engage in collective memory and shared meaning-making, advocacy, and cultural and ecological stewardship—while in their labor practices they assume an ethos of responsibility and sustainability. Under these conditions,

artistic production can become praxis. Fisherpoetry serves to document the lived experience of labor, but also to advocate, steward, and ensure its survival. Thus, in contrast to the whaling case, fisherpoetry illustrates a more reflexive and publicly engaged form of cultural production. The work/art relationship remains co-constitutive in both cases, but the form that this mutual shaping takes differs according to the labor regime.

The Dialectical Co-Constitution of Work and Art

This leads me to my main theoretical intervention—what I call the *dialectical co-constitution of work and art*. I define the dialectical co-constitution of work and art as the historically structured tension between the two under the division of labor, and their mutual interdependence. In other words, work and art are both co-constitutive and dialectically in tension. To understand the work/art dialectic, we can look to a form that will be familiar to worker-artists: the poem.

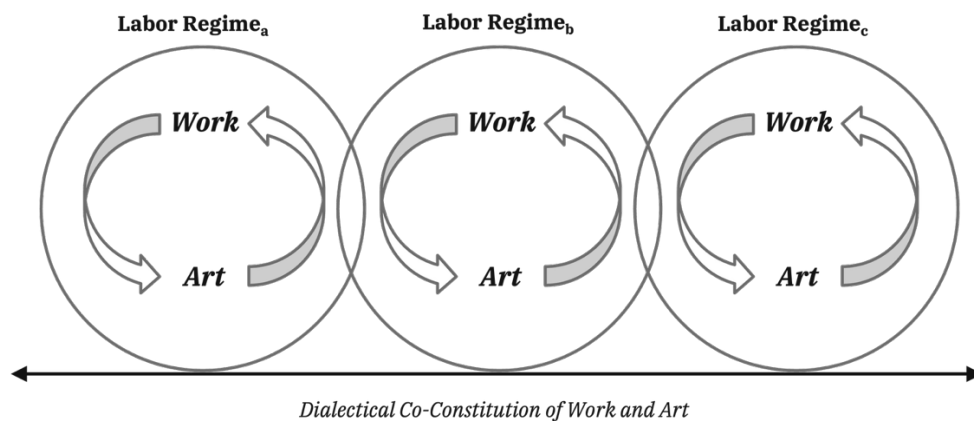
In his essay “Levels and Opposites,” American poet and literary critic Randall Jarrell (1996) argues that poetic structure is not static, but the dynamic organization of opposing forces. A poem, he writes, is “not static things, but changing processes,” whose unity emerges through “the struggle of opposites.” This insight can be extended sociologically. Just as poetic structure emerges through the struggle of opposites, so too does the struggle between work and art produce something new—whether new transformations of the worker-artist, or new forms of occupational identity, solidarity, or praxis.

In my dissertation, I discuss multiple contradictions operating at different levels: the work/art dialectic; the socially constructed opposition between mental and manual labor; material versus symbolic production; labor versus leisure; productive versus nonproductive. The

core of this argument is not that labor contains contradictions (Marx already gave us that). My core intervention is that the work/art separation itself is historically produced by the division of labor—yet, workers’ lived cultural practices continually destabilize it. Thus the central contradiction in my argument is: work and art are structurally separated, but experientially co-constituted.

In Figure 1, I depict the dialectical co-constitution of work and art across shifting labor regimes. Within each labor regime, work generates material conditions that shape artistic production. Art, in turn, feeds back into work by reorganizing its meaning, producing occupational identity, and, at times, fostering collective solidarity through praxis. While the dialectical relation persists across regimes, its form is historically specific.

Figure 1. Dialectical Co-Constitution of Work and Art



Thus, Labor Regime A may represent industrial whaling, Labor Regime B may represent twenty-first-century commercial fishing, and Labor Regime C may represent an unknown future transformation of the fishing labor regime. Each represents a new configuration of the work/art dialectic. By placing these regimes side-by-side along a temporal axis, I suggest that the dialectic persists, but its form shifts. Although, that is not to say that this occurs in a linear process.

Nevertheless, these transformations are not random departures; the overlaps in the labor regimes show areas of continuity—in this case, tradition allows us to compare industrial whalers to contemporary commercial fishers. As this model illustrates, labor regimes are the mechanism that reconfigure the work/art dialectical, through their co-constitution.

The Worker-Artist Across Occupations

The dialectical co-constitution of work and art is not unique to U.S. fishing occupations, though it takes historically specific forms there. Across professions, occupations, and class positions, workers routinely translate occupational experience into cultural production. Artisan farmers like Wendell Berry document ecological change and narrate agrarian loss; teaching-artists practice art alongside pedagogy; physicians like William Carlos Williams and contemporary poet Dr. Rafael Campo publish poetry that reframes care and illness through narrative reflection. In each case, work generates the material and affective conditions for art, while artistic production reshapes the meaning and public representation of labor. Yet the form this co-constitution takes depends on the structure of the occupation itself—for example, whether it is unionized or entrepreneurial, professionalized or precarious.

Similarly, not all instances of art-work constitute artistic labor praxis. If art emerges from labor in many fields, praxis refers to those moments when cultural production not only depicts work, but when it also seeks to transform its structuring conditions. According to Rachel Skaggs and Tania Aparicio (2023), creative workers may engage in collective action in different ways. Thus, for example, those who are more organizationally embedded (such as museum workers) may engage in artistic labor praxis through collective bargaining, while those in more diffuse occupations (like musicians) may engage in artistic labor praxis through community building.

Nevertheless, artistic labor praxis may lead to new forms of solidarity rooted in the relationship between art and labor.

Twenty-First-Century Labor Transformations

The conditions that produce worker-artists are themselves shifting under twenty-first-century transformations in work. Portfolio careers and nonstandard employment arrangements have become increasingly common, especially in cultural and knowledge sectors (Lingo and Tepper 2013; Chong 2021). Meanwhile, with a proliferation in project-based employment, workers must actively extend their skill sets across assignments. O'Mahony and Bechky (2006) describe this process as “stretchwork”: work that builds on established competencies while introducing new elements, enabling workers to resolve the career progression paradox of needing experience to obtain experience. Hénaut, Lena, and Accominotti (2023) similarly show that such work arrangements foster polyoccupationalism, or simultaneous identification with multiple occupations, while Gondal and Wigen (2025) demonstrate that occupations and artistic hobbies form patterned associations, revealing a cultural duality between paid work and artistic practice. At the same time, precarious employment reshapes worker identity itself. Vallas and Christin (2017) argue that insecurity encourages entrepreneurial forms of self-presentation through personal branding, while Caza and Creary (2016) show that modern professional identities are increasingly plural and structurally complex, requiring individuals to negotiate how multiple roles coexist, integrate, and augment each other.

These transformations complicate classical theories of the division of labor. For Durkheim, solidarity emerged through functional specialization; for Marx, it emerged through shared exploitation. Yet in a postindustrial context marked by precariousness and diffuse

employment, the separation between work and art because increasingly unstable. As labor regimes transform, so too do the forms of worker-artistry and solidarity they enable. Rather than dissolving the division of labor, twenty-first-century transformations make the dialectical co-constitution of work and art more visible across occupations.

Work and Art Beyond Dualism

I want to conclude by taking seriously Marx's vision in *The German Ideology*, where he imagines a society in which one might fish in the afternoon and engage in culture or criticism by evening.

...in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming a hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic. (Marx and Engels 1978:160)

While Marx framed the dissolution of division of labor as a utopian possibility beyond capitalism, my research suggests that workers have long blurred this line between work and art in their everyday lives *within* capitalism. This does not mean that the division of labor disappears; rather, its structural differentiation persists even as workers rework and destabilize the symbolic boundaries it produces. By destabilizing the work/art dualism, fisherpoets may point us toward new forms of occupational identity beyond hybridity—a new transformation of the work/art dialectic—and offer new possibilities for working subjectivity and worker-artist solidarities. What emerges, then, is not the end of the division of labor but a reconfiguration of how it is lived and experienced: work and art remain structurally differentiated, yet dialectically co-constituted in practice, generating new possibilities for occupational identity and collective meaning under

contemporary labor regimes. If Marx imagined a world in which exclusive spheres of activity would disappear, this study shows that even with the persistence of division of labor, workers continually blur, contest, and reorganize those spheres. Rather than a utopian endpoint, the dialectical co-constitution of work and art thus becomes an ongoing practice through which workers endure, reinterpret, and sometimes transform the conditions of their labor.

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