

## Intellectual Labor and the Success of Societies<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This paper is a summary of a series of works dedicated to the study of ideational labor as a primary factor in the survival of groups (Even-Zohar forthcoming). Its main hypothesis is that without the ability to create an ideational infrastructure, which may be achieved by means of the intellectual industries, the likelihood of success, and in many cases sheer survival, is very scant. The labor of idea-makers in combination with the activities of cultural entrepreneurs is therefore hypothesized as a necessary condition for the creation of social energy that makes success possible.

Dieser Artikel geht als Zusammenfassung einer Reihe von Arbeiten hervor, die der Studie ‚ideenbildender Arbeit‘ (*ideational labor*) als primärer Faktor im Überleben von Gruppen gewidmet sind (Even-Zohar; im Erscheinen). Als Haupthypothese wird diskutiert, dass die Wahrscheinlichkeit auf Erfolg, und in vielen Fällen auf ein bloßes Überleben, ohne eine ‚ideenbildende‘ Infrastruktur sehr gering ist. Die Arbeit von ‚Ideen-Schöpfern‘ (*idea-makers*) in Kombination mit der Arbeit ‚kultureller Unternehmer‘ (*cultural entrepreneurs*) wird deshalb als eine notwendige Bedingung für die Entwicklung gesellschaftlicher Leistungsmöglichkeit (*social energy*) und als Voraussetzung für zivilisatorischen Erfolg hypothetisiert.

*Intellectual labor* is a term that refers to many types of ideational activities, the semiotic products of which range from images and narratives to explicit ideas about the management of human life. These products can be verbal, that is, carried out through language, or non-verbal, that is, carried out through other means, such as buildings, paintings, sculptures, music, or dance. Their efficiency depends very much on the status of the generating industry, which basically emanates from its particular degree of institutionalization in the society in which it is embedded. These products enjoy vast consumption: they make the materials from which our ways of thinking, viewing the world, and acting in the world derive. Beliefs, feelings, sentiments and hopes, tools for evaluating everything that goes around, and for generating action – all derive from the products distrib-

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<sup>1</sup> Abridged version of paper delivered at the Reykjavík symposium *Athafnalandið Ísland*, Reykjavík, Sigurður Nordal Institute and the Icelandic Chamber of Commerce, April 19, 2005.

uted by the semiotic industries. Whatever the origins and the circumstances under which they have been made, their function as a blueprint for the management of both individual and collective life has been recognized by all students of society. As an aggregate, they constitute human culture, the ‘software of the mind’ (Hofstede 1997) – the hidden scripts, the ‘strategies of action’ (Swidler 1986), with which humans manage their lives.

The perpetuation of products, or otherwise the maintenance of the recurring repertoire of possibilities for life management, is not possible without a reinforced agreement on a daily basis. As John Davis has phrased it, culture would not exist without the daily negotiation among the members of society, who actually produce and reproduce on a daily basis the necessary tools for social management:

[...] Every action and thought which involves other people is creative sociability, attempting to make a social world which is secure and stable to live in. It is continuous, pervasive, inescapable that we create as we go along: the words I utter reaffirm my commitment to a particular language which I re-create and modify as I speak. My spouse and children and I negotiate to create a family – one which is different, you may accept, from the family in which I am a child. This is a universal, popular and irrepressible activity: everyone is creating most of the time – a universal human propensity to make arrangements which we hope will be relatively stable and durable. (Davis 1994: 99)

In this sense, society operates as a marketplace, where the exchange of daily semiotic products is carried out anonymously by just about everyone. Societies with a high level of such successful daily exchange are “stable and durable” in Davis’s formulation. It is generally agreed that societies strive to achieve the stability and durability, which in concrete terms means a high level of repetition of the options available for the management of life. However, Davis actually refers to a situation where he “re-creates and modifies as he speaks.” This means that modifications cannot be avoided even when a strong tendency for avoidance of change is prevalent. This is basically so because people often deviate even from their repetitive habits. People also make mistakes, that is, introduce modifications unintentionally. In addition, there cannot be a full transmission of culture from one generation to the next, partly because new generations not always are able to observe and learn everything they have been either shown or taught, partly because individuals have different learning curves, and last but not least, because at least part of the new generation do not really *want* to follow their predecessors.

Although the tendency for durability may be widely spread among the members of a group, and popularly supported in everyday life by gen-

erations of people, it normally becomes overt and acknowledged when manifest on an institutionalized level. There is always a group of people who take it upon themselves to keep the society for which they consider themselves responsible as a durable culture. These people, who may be engaged in a large variety of intellectual industries, generate the necessary ideas, images, artifacts, habits and measures to reinforce and reaffirm the repertoire of options that they want to protect against modification. In addition, at least part of them is also engaged in a host of activities where all of these are told to people. They may act in various and different fields as teachers, preachers, tribunes, or anyone in position to talk to people, tell them what to do or at least try and persuade them. These individuals are the preservers of the current order. They are the ones who create labels, standards, and canons, the “legitimizing discourse, a mode of persuasion which would secure consent” (Lawrence 1996: 59). Undoubtedly, from the point of view of defending the interests of the group for which they stand, their contribution is not only substantial but indispensable for the continued existence of the group, for its coherence and eventually for its survival over time.

The standardizing agencies, those preservers of the current culture, can however become an obstacle on the way of a society to maintaining itself over time. It may look, if we observe the history of a society in a superficial way, as if the transition from a positive and indispensable role to a negative and damaging one is so quick that the people who happen to get caught in such situations cannot really understand what might be wrong with what they are doing. Normally, turning points or tide reversals take place abruptly, but the processes leading to such reversals may have taken a much longer time, un-remarked and unobserved even by the most trained eyes. In such situations, the majority of the members of a group, trained as they are to employ durable strategies, are not likely to be able to know what to do, and that includes the very need to be aware and understand that something has changed that requires new measures. A different type of intellectual agencies becomes necessary.

The type of producers that may subsequently emerge is different from the preservers of durability. These are people who must now produce *new* options, meaning new ways of thinking, new images, new ideas, new procedures and strategies. They are often called ‘innovators,’ ‘inventors,’ ‘revolutionaries,’ ‘heretics,’ and many other labels, depending on the time and the territory, and on the way they are evaluated by their contemporaries. As it is the case with the providers of consent, some of these people can only make intellectual products but have no capacity to propagate them or create the means by which they can be implemented. Others, who often do not create any new options by themselves, may emerge to be able to translate potential options to realities. The first category of

people can be called ‘idea-makers,’ while the second is often called ‘entrepreneurs.’ It is not unlikely that at times idea-makers and entrepreneurs might be the same people, but this is not a general rule, which is why I suggest thinking about what they do in terms of roles rather than in terms of persons.

When irregular circumstances emerge, they become pressuring factors that need to be urgently dealt with. These are moments where people get aware of the irregularity of the situation, and therefore it may be relatively easier for them to accept that someone should come with relevant suggestions for new options. A typical case of this type are catastrophes and misfortunes, whether caused by nature, such as drought, inundation, volcano eruptions and earthquakes, or caused by man, such as war, famine or ocean fish depletion caused by overfishing. At other times, on the other hand, no visible circumstances emerge to suggest that any steps should be taken in order to solve some situation that is not even seen, sensed or recognized. When certain idea-makers then emerge to suggest that steps should be taken, their suggestions are more likely to be rejected even though they may be arguing that if the recommended steps are not taken there will be negative repercussions for the well-being and even the very survival of their society. People may react to the suggestions, the new proposed options, with either indifference or rejection. These options would be taken to be unnecessary, uncalled-for, ludicrous, utopian to the extreme, or outright conflicting with the established order.

The success of any new proposed option naturally depends on a variety of factors. Speaking in broad terms, if the nature of a proposal has to do with some focused decisions that must lead to some action – such as using thermal waters for heating a city or founding a new air company such as *Loftleiðir* – then, again, depending on the extent and range of that action, it is not likely to have success without the ability to mobilize those people who hold the power to implement decisions, replace them or circumnavigate. These options, however, may not be available to idea-makers under all circumstances, which naturally leave them with only those options that might be available, depending on the degree of risk, both personal and collective, which they are prepared to take. Nevertheless, there is one more option, which often means in practical terms very slow movement towards a target, but at times may be, on the other hand, extremely quick. This option entails not a direct mobilization of power-holders, but of the large masses, implementing not focused decisions but attempting to introduce a large-scale shift in major components of the repertoire of culture.

Replacing any such components, as well as introducing new ones, has never been a simple matter. However, inasmuch as culture is both perpetuated and modified by the mass of anonymous members of society, it

is also interfered with by deliberate thinking and acting by specific individuals. Evaluated on a cross-cultural scale, societies appear to be different in their ability to generate those individuals who would think and act in order to initiate change and innovation, and in their ability to maintain a balance between the power given to those individuals and the options available to the masses. It is my contention that it is these two parameters that make the difference between failure and success.

The range of states between failure and success is large. On the extreme, absolute failure simply means ceasing to exist. The Tasmanians or the Beothucks are just two such cases out of many. It would be much more difficult, on the other hand, to think of the meaning of ‘absolute success.’ Theoretically, an unlimited number of options available to as many members as possible of a society would be an adequate description, normally known under the name of ‘utopia.’ However, in between those extremes there is a whole series of possibilities. For example, famine, diseases, a high rate of mortality and a very restricted number of options for the management of life in general would obviously be universally evaluated as a state of affairs far removed from success. In contrast, some ability to access food resources and maintain the group across generations would be some success, obviously the lowest level of it, though no one thinks of it in these terms. More often than not, such a mode of existence is called ‘survival.’

*Survival* certainly does not connote either success or prosperity, but it nevertheless requires basic proficiencies, skills, and some abilities for solution making. It requires the ability to maneuver with a restricted inventory of options. Felt and Sinclair call this ability “[a] relatively successful adaptation [...] based on flexibility, substitution and co-operation” (Felt & Sinclair 1995: 210). Analyzing the strategies of survival with the help of which communities in Newfoundland manage to carry on with their lives, they thus point at the ‘clever maneuvering’ carried out by the members of the group. This entails learning a large variety of skills that can be traded off with other members of the community, shifting turns with relatives in getting employment and unemployment payments alternately, and the like. However, even if we could trace more conspicuous idea-makers among those who are able of clever maneuvering, it is obvious that they are not able to either think of or implement any options that aren’t already known and used.

In both popular and academic conceptualizations, and probably unavoidably so, there is a recurrent fragmentation of events and processes into many different categories. These categories more often than not follow only what can be overtly observed and has been publicly institutionalized. Quite often, this prevents us from being able to adequately evaluate what is taking, or has taken place in the life of societies and people. Polit-

cal structures, literature, architecture, the arts, urban planning, the planting of trees, education, health services, general construction, irrigation and agriculture, fisheries, industries, music and sports – all of these can, and have been dealt with as separate categories. I am not contesting the importance, or the usefulness of these categories, nor the assumption that they have their own specific patterns and regularities, functioning in some autonomous way in relation to various other fields. Certainly, if one wants to understand something about, say, the planting of trees in Iceland, one must dig into the relevant historical documents and find out how it was made possible after so many centuries of deforestation, as well as study the necessary botanical and climatic parameters relevant to the case.

However, my contention is that by having been engaged with all of these acts throughout the 19th and 20th century, the Icelanders have managed to not simply create an array of disparate facts such as an independent state, certain industries, new social structures, electric power or transportation networks. My contention is that by doing all of these they have developed something more powerful, something that functions as an *infrastructure* for the modern Icelandic society – the intellectual industries, which generate an ever-growing amount of energy. It is this energy that has eventually led to an ever-growing proliferation of options, constituting collective success, which has become both manifest and visible in several conspicuously established fields, such as ‘the economy,’ understood in its narrow sense. It is subsequently also my contention that the historical circumstances in Newfoundland have obviously not made it possible for such an infrastructure to have been developed.

In conclusion, it is my contention that what seems to distinguish between different groups is the amount of energy generated by intellectual labor, comprising a large variety of industries and different types of agents, such as idea-makers, image-makers, entrepreneurs and agents of transmission. When the volume of intellectual labor grows – meaning that more and more people actually can be effectively active in the industries – the amount of energy leading to higher levels of success definitely grows accordingly. If one wishes to trace the roots of the lack of success one must therefore try and evaluate the status, the relative presence or relative absence, of *intellectual labor*. If there are no conspicuous signs found for such labor, in all likelihood these are the roots of non-success. If certain from-above bodies such as governments in times of distress decide, in order to set things in motion or salvage a situation, to pour financial and other resources into a certain community, without dealing with the intellectual infrastructure, these resources will generate energy in the form of employment and possible revenues, financial and social, for only a short term. As we can deduce from the case of Newfoundland, and many other

less successful communities around the globe, there will sooner or later ensue failure and decline.

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