

## **Cultural Institutions Studies:**

### **Investigating the Transformation of Cultural Goods**

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#### **Abstract**

This paper aims to present the epistemological foundations of a new scientific focus called “Cultural Institutions Studies”<sup>1</sup> (a translation of the German term “Kulturbetriebslehre”) which has recently been developed at the Institute of Culture Management and Culture Studies of the University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna. Cultural Institutions Studies synthesizes a cultural, sociological and an economic approach to cultural goods and services. Cultural Institutions Studies is concerned with:

- (1) The formation of cultural goods as meaningful symbolic entities and their transformation into cultural commodities, i.e. the process of production, distribution and reception/consumption of cultural goods;
- (2) The analysis of cultural practices and their institutional frames which constitute and regulate the formation of cultural goods and services;
- (3) The examination of specific characteristics of cultural institutions as organizational settings; and
- (4) The social organization of cultural labor and other cultural activities (e.g.-cultural policy, funding and legal systems).

#### **Introduction**

Cultural Institutions Studies<sup>2</sup> appears at the interface between cultural, social, and economic sciences. Its aim is to expand on the research fields of cultural economics and cultural as well as arts management studies and oversteps their limitations by integrating certain aspects of cultural studies. Economic thought has certainly brought important insights to the operations of the production, distribution, and mediation of cultural goods and services. However, cultural economics frequently fails to explain specific features, local particularities, and the diversity of the cultural sector. It generally does not consider the elaboration of non-economic aspects of cultural goods such as symbolic representation of cultural identities; the elaboration, and reproduction of social distinctions; or the articulation of social critique – although all these aspects are significant to all kinds of exchange.

Since culture<sup>3</sup> can be seen as a symbolic system as well as a field of experience and practical action, it is too closely related to everyday life that it would be possible to

transcend it. Consequently, culture is difficult to conceptualize. In this respect, it is understandable that Raymond Williams (1976, 87) denotes culture in his “Keywords” as one of the most complex words of the English language. In this essay, we seek to specify the notion “cultural” in the usage of “cultural goods”, “cultural institutions’ sphere”, and “Cultural Institutions Studies”. It should become clear that in Cultural Institutions Studies the discourse on culture differs from that in those scientific fields that conceive of “culture” anthropologically. In sum, Cultural Institutions Studies explicitly deal with the emergence and functioning of cultural goods and cultural institutions.

In using the term “cultural goods”, we refer to goods that are closely linked with cultural valuations, or, to paraphrase George Dickie (1971, 101), cultural goods are candidates for cultural appreciation. However, this does not mean that cultural goods do not have other pivotal dimensions. Cultural goods oscillate between different uses, functions, values, and significances. For instance, if cultural goods become subjects of economic exchange, a monetary value emerges. It is obvious that monetary value is the result of cultural processes, but this does not mean that everything should be labeled as “cultural”. Moreover, the oscillation of cultural goods between several contexts and social uses makes them quite different from other private goods such as industrial products and nutrition as well as public goods such as security, ecology, and freedom of expression.

Our line of reasoning is developed along a critique of cultural economics and of cultural and arts management theory as well as of textualism within contemporary cultural studies. We argue that:

- 1) the contingency of the concept “cultural good” and “work of art” rejects any effort to establish stable definitions about these concepts;
- 2) the traditional concepts of needs and preferences in economic theory are not far reaching enough to explain economic exchanges because economic theory does not investigate their elaboration and interrelation;
- 3) only a reductionistic theory of action can be derived from the textuality-paradigm. For addressing the microstructures of cultural practices and professional action we advocate a “practical turn” within cultural studies.

A description of a basic model of the cultural sector will be developed and the research field of Cultural Institutions Studies will be presented.

### **Some Conceptions and Misconceptions of Cultural Goods**

The cultural institution sphere can be defined as the sphere that includes the social organization of production, distribution, mediation, and reception of specific cultural goods. The social gestalt<sup>4</sup> of this sphere is contingent on historical, geographical, and social factors. In order to describe the adjective “cultural” as part of the concept “cultural good”, we have to highlight the theoretical and practical context in which cultural goods are discussed. Research within Cultural Institutions Studies is not the same as in cultural anthropology and sociology of culture. Our concept of culture is restricted to specific cultural entities (artifacts and practices) that are bound by a specific institutional framework. Within a broader definition of culture, a funeral, flower arrangement, football match, and psychotherapeutic session can be seen as cultural phenomena; but it would be misleading to define undertakers, florists, football players, and psychotherapists as cultural workers.<sup>5</sup>

Consequently, it is necessary to differentiate Cultural Institutions Studies from both the traditional approaches to arts and culture as well as from a solely economic analysis in favor of an explicitly interdisciplinary context. In particular, economic analysis of cultural goods has often been dismissed by traditional approaches to culture and the arts (for example, hermeneutics, phenomenology, and semiotics) as an external commercial attribution that is irrelevant to the interpretation and the understanding of symbolic and aesthetic meanings. Marxist cultural theorists of the Frankfurt School, the Birmingham School, and more recently by Janet Wolff, Diana Crane, and Pierre Bourdieu among others have criticized this ‘idealistic’ traditionalism.

For economists, however, the symbolic and aesthetic dimensions of cultural goods are considered negligible. Consequently, economists treat them just like other economic goods. With a few exceptions (e.g.- the production-of-culture approach), cultural theorists and cultural economists live in different worlds, experience different phenomena, and practice different discourses. As they do not know each other’s research, they remain caught in the epistemic style their particular community of knowledge. To sum up, fruitful exchanges of ideas and research practices between cultural theorists and economists rarely occur.

The study of the formation of cultural goods as symbolic entities and their transmission in other contexts (for example commodification, political representation, sacralization, social distinction) forces us to focus on the fact that cultural goods (artifacts and services) create, incorporate, convey, serve, and represent a variety of meanings and values. Thus, cultural goods, which are to be perceived as symbolic and material entities, are subject to various forms of valuation and evaluation. Moreover, being a cultural good presupposes the existence of a public sphere or at least communities of practice. Otherwise, as Wittgenstein (1983) and Geertz (1973) argue, the negotiation about its value would not make any sense at all. The generation of meaning as well as the process of perception and comprehension are social actions that are based on the cultural techniques of coding, decoding, and interpreting. The cultural techniques and the goods' practical uses are inherent to a community of practice. Cultural affairs are always public because they are necessarily related to symbolic meanings that are based on common identities and shared sets of social rules. On the other hand, the access to cultural goods and services cannot always be assumed, because of a lack of know-how. The tension between socio-cultural inclusion and exclusion is an inevitable characteristic of cultural communities.

### **Critique of the Concept of Cultural Economics**

The starting point of a systematic development of cultural economics was Baumol and Bowen's (1966) formulation of the "cost disease" in the performing arts. In effect, a series of market anomalies were identified that challenged the traditional market model. However, most of the research work in the field of cultural economics deals with the narrow field of the high arts. In addition, the traditional paradigm of mainstream economics (methodological individualism, quantification, demand and supply analysis, analysis of market failures, etc.) still dominates the field of cultural economics. Only a few works of some cultural economists (for example Klammer 1996, 13-28, Throsby 2001) have tried recently to broaden economic analysis by introducing an anthropological and sociological dimension.

In economic theory, goods are perceived as a means to satisfy specific needs. A consistent preference order, which is defined by the axioms of reflexivity, transitivity, and completeness, entails a ranking of goods and the deduction of a benefit function. In sum, a rational human being makes optimal decisions about the allocation of scarce

resources through a cost-benefit analysis. We argue, however, that the concept of preference-order fails to explain the relationship between needs and preferences. Only a small proportion of needs can be considered as ‘given’ (for example biological needs). Most needs, in contrast, emerge through a process of collective activities. The concept of homo-oeconomicus considers neither the sociality of human coexistence nor the ambivalence of preference formation (see Taylor 1989, Sen 2001). In contrast, we want to contextualize needs and preferences in a social environment, which is always contingent, in order to denaturalize them. In effect, the satisfaction of needs happens in a socio-cultural context, which pre-enforces a distinction between legitimate and illegitimate needs and also constitutes new needs. As these needs and their satisfaction emanate from the same cultural context, we recognize a strong interrelation between them. Needs do not always pre-exist their potential satisfaction. Further, the artifacts that satisfy needs are not always considered as scarce. For instance, in the last century the need for recreation spread throughout the industrialized countries. Yet, recreation can be satisfied either in a costly manner (for instance expensive ski-vacations) or virtually for free (for instance a walk in a public park).

Indeed, artifacts and relating activities – the range of goods satisfying needs – may be instrumental in the emergence of new needs. For instance, the emergence of museums in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century cannot simply be traced back to the need for education without attending to the political function of arts and culture in the rise of bourgeois society. In short, the traditional concepts of needs and preferences need to be further investigated.

Cultural artifacts and activities that satisfy a need can be defined as goods and services that yield a specific benefit that derives from a number of functions such as education, political representation, and entertainment. The emergence of different functions depends, therefore, on the producers’ intended use and the consumers’ behavior (actual use). In fact, several functions appear simultaneously so that we cannot separate single sources according to their beneficial effects. Nevertheless, we can consider some functions dominant by referring to concrete situations: in the market, the economic function is predominant; in public discourse symbolic and political functions are more important; in the educational context, the semantic aspect stands in the foreground. Furthermore, in socio-cultural settings we may find the function of the constitution of identities and the signification of social distinctions as predominant.

Thus, our concept of cultural goods and institutions is open to different social contexts (MacIntyre 1973, 2-3). Consequently, we reject an essentialist approach in defining cultural goods. A conceptual openness is epistemologically unavoidable.

### **Critique of Structuralism**

“Culture as text“ has been one of the most popular catchphrase among cultural theorists during the past decades. The structuralist approach emphasizes the semantic and semiotic aspects of culture. Of course, the textuality thesis does not deny the great number of cultural manifestations such as music, dance, social rituals that do not primarily exist as linguistic entities. Nevertheless, every cultural phenomenon creates, conveys, and represents meaning and, therefore, can be treated as a sign that has, according to Roland Barthes (1971), the character of a dictum. Thus, the textuality-thesis argues that cultural phenomena should be treated as texts because:

- (1) they are meaningful;
- (2) they emerge in pre-structured fields (that is to say in a general symbolic order);
- (3) they are correlated to other cultural phenomena by reference, allusion, differentiation, opposition and negation.

In that sense, every social relation, interaction, and cultural exchange is structurally textual (e.g.- Geertz 1973, Lyotard 1984). Jacques Derrida (1976: 158) even claims that, “*there is nothing outside the text. (...)*”

The interpretation of contextually as intertextuality privileges the “text” as a universal concept in scientific research of culture. The textuality-thesis asserts that social action and social practice in general can only be studied if they can be textualized. Our critique of the textuality-thesis is twofold: first, we believe that the importance of textuality (linguistic turn) has been overestimated by structuralism and post-structuralism and, therefore, it has been made into an epistemic dogma. Second, the textual reproduction of cultural practice (i.e. the modus of its representation) should not be confused with the cultural practice itself. Everyday experiences, actions, and performances that unfold in a field of practices include many implicit and tacit aspects, which cannot always be textualized (see Polanyi 1958, Schatzki 1996).

To sum up: In real life, human beings follow neither the abstract decision-making model of homo-oeconomicus nor the action model of textual-structuralism. Instead, they act according to their socialization, and they adopt cultural identities and practices

according to their tacit understanding of a particular situation (see Polyani 1958, Goffman, 1975, Bourdieu 1998, Wenger 1998). Practice, as a central concept in social sciences, refers to the structural and institutional framework of actions as well as to informal aspects of action. The informal aspects of action include a microstructure of action that cannot easily be articulated (for instance, practical knowledge). However, a theory of action alone would fail to conceptualize practice as a social phenomenon. Thus, a theory of institutions and social structures is necessary to take into account the macrostructure of practice (see Bloor 1997).

Since the microstructure of social action is ignored, only a reductionistic theory of action can be derived from the textuality-paradigm. For addressing the interferences and intersections between actions and symbolic forms, cultural practices, and discourses we have elaborated the foundations for a “practical turn” within the studies of the cultural institutions' sphere (see also Zembylas 2004, part 3).

### **Towards Cultural Institutions Studies**

The cultural institutions' sphere is a macro-sociological concept, which is characterized by specific local structures, organizational forms, rules, and conventions that pre-structure social actions within that sphere. (Yet the cultural institutions' sphere is not solely limited to macro-social analysis. As the study of every ‘agency and practice’ issue, it includes micro-socio-analysis as well.) The essential role of the cultural sector is that it makes things happen.

Cultural Institutions Studies follows an institutional approach that differs from most of the functionalistic concepts within social and political sciences. We believe that institutions do not only regulate social actions, but that they are also formed by social actions. We have to be aware that the social field of action, which constitutes institutions, is only a part of social practices in general. As Wittgenstein contends institutions structure social action but they do not determine it.<sup>6</sup>

In our view, cultural goods emerge in industrialized countries in a pre-structured social space, which is instrumental for their symbolic and economic meaning. However, institutions should not be exclusively identified with organizational entities (for example theatres, galleries, publishing-houses, music labels, etc.), but also with explicit rules (e.g.- legal norms, established professions), forms of exchange (markets, social prestige) as well as with implicit conventions (behavioral patterns such as social roles)

that form and stabilize professional practices. Due to its structure, the sphere of culture institutions constitutes a practical framework and evokes a regularity of activities in the sense of customs. Additionally, our institutional approach is broadened by a theory of practice and social action (see Hasitschka 1997, Tschmuck 2003, 2005).

Since institutions are not a-historical constructs, we have to reconstruct their development. In the wake of the establishment of a civil society in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, art and culture (production, distribution, and reception) became less controlled by the clerical institutions and increasingly imbued with meaning by markets and politics. Several social authorities and institutions have since exercised an influence on the formation of the cultural institutions' sphere (see Zembylas 1997). These main social authorities include:

- the legal system and cultural politics;
- the culture markets;
- the conditions of professionalism and production (education, technology, mentalities);
- media, art criticism, modes, public discourse on cultural affairs;
- institutions (such as museums, theaters, concert halls) that display, mediate, and convey understanding of cultural goods and services.

As noted above, we have to consider the functions of institutions in order to understand their social interrelationships and interdependencies. The extent of the influence of each social authority varies. We can find neither a methodological nor an empirical reason to establish a hierarchical ranking of various institutional authorities. None of the authorities can be adequately studied in isolation from the others. All authorities and institutions are polymorphic bodies; in other words, they change their form, appearance, and effects. It is therefore, impossible, to reduce them to a fixed formula or a “system” in order to describe them. This implies two conclusions: first, the formation of cultural goods is not a linear causal process, and second, this process is contingent (i.e. accidental, fleeting, and manouverable).

The contingency does not deny power-relations and some kind of “soft” determination. In a metaphorical sense institutions inevitably operate as gatekeepers to organizational structures and social fields in order to generate a surplus value, to create scarcity, and to transfer cultural goods into commodities. Cultural institutions, therefore,

administer the scarcity of cultural goods by excluding some artifacts and practices from further production, marketing, and reception and by including others. They act as a kind of filter that enables or disables the economic and cultural exploitation of artifacts and services, and create or prevent public visibility. Without the phenomenon of scarcity the market would not be thinkable. As we argued before, cultural goods are not per se scarce. Only if they are perceived as not freely disposable, scarcity emerges. Consequently, scarcity is constitutive of the exchange function and the formation of economic value. For that reason, the exchange function can be interpreted as an economic function. If cultural goods and services are perceived as scarce, they become commodities. However, when cultural goods are commodified, their symbolic function does not vanish. In contrast to pure economic goods, the economic function and the symbolic function of cultural goods coexist and interact (see Frey and Pommerehne 1989). Therefore, the economic and symbolic functions of cultural goods and services should be analyzed simultaneously.

### **The Research Field of Cultural Institutions Studies**

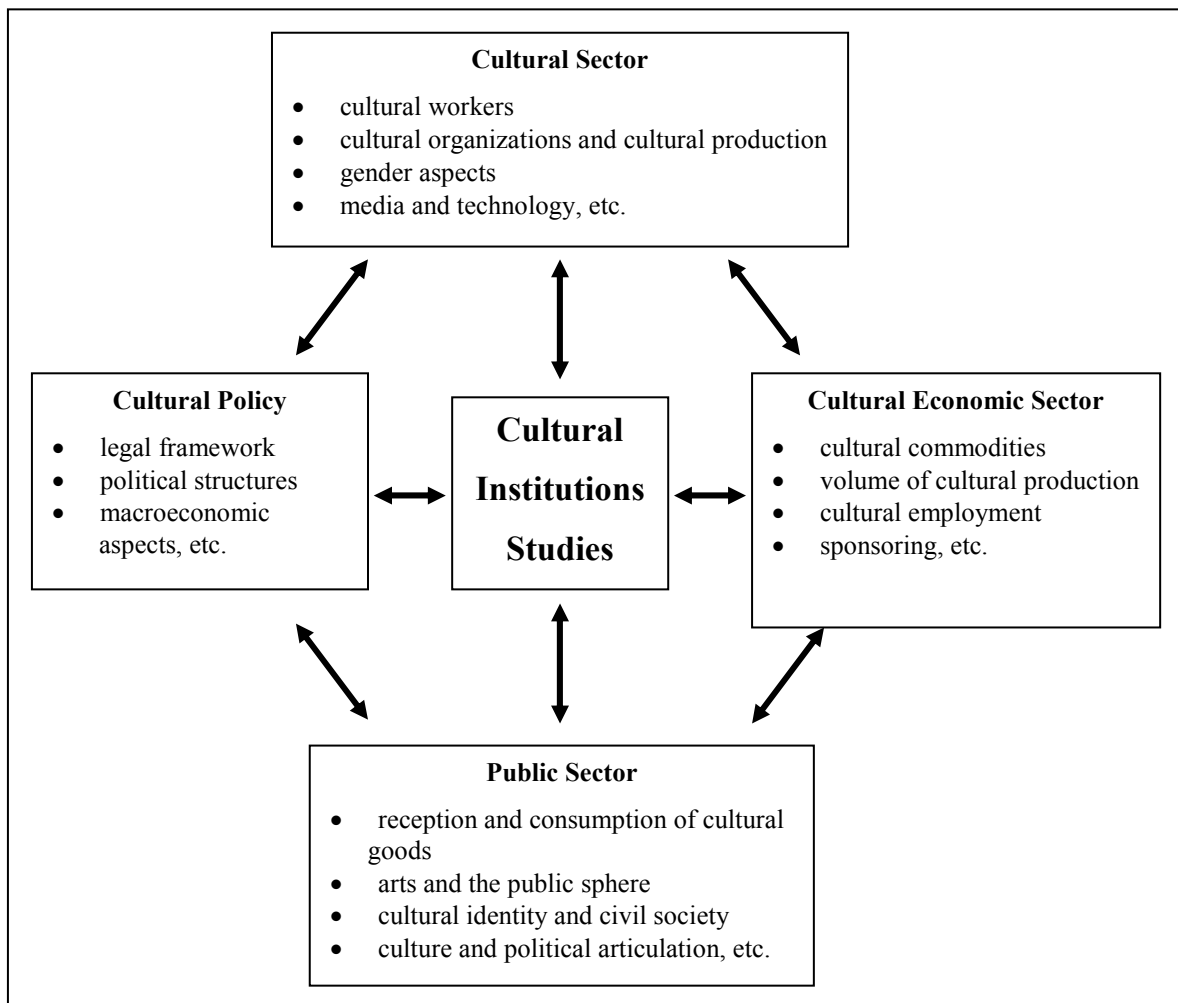
The cultural institutions' sphere becomes more and more involved in the process of globalization (for example international trade agreements, copyright legislation, global distribution networks, fragmentation of cultural labor markets, global communication and technology transfer) blurring the borders of national economies. Apart from the economic dimension of globalization, the cultural sphere fulfils a crucial social policy function. In the cultural sector innovative forms of articulation and representation are developed that may improve and expand of social communication and interchange. Culture becomes a field of political and social negotiations. The research field of Cultural Institutions Studies is a very broad one, as pointed out in table 1. The named research fields should be taken as examples.

The main research issues in Cultural Institutions Studies, therefore, is centered on:

- cultural interpretations and valuations (e.g., arts and audience media, art criticism, and markets);
- social relationships within cultural practices (e.g., the networks of professionals, interaction with the audience);
- the interaction between single cultural organizations (aims, structure, activities) and the social environment (i.e. cultural sector);

- the economic exchange of cultural goods and services;
- conditions of professional practice (e.g., education, capacity building, earnings, mobility);
- professional practices and technological development;
- cultural policy analysis (e.g., cultural statistics, cultural diplomacy, comparative policy evaluation).

Table 1: The main research fields of Cultural Institutions Studies



In table 1, the political, social, and economic perspectives of Cultural Institutions Studies are highlighted. As can be seen, we do not only focus on cultural structures, but also on activities within the cultural institutions' sphere. Therefore, a purely descriptive research methodology would be shortsighted. By analyzing actions and cultural practices, our research model inevitably includes normative assumptions. According to

intrinsic aims, activities within the cultural field can be successful or not. This constitutes the internal practical perspective. Furthermore, human activities result from social relations and bear social significance. This represents the external dimension of practice. In order to analyze processes within culture institutions, one must focus on values, structures, strategies, and interactions that constitute practices as well as the ends of these activities.

The interdisciplinary approach of Cultural Institutions Studies implies a pragmatic methodology. The reconstruction of particular cases and their environments enforce the application of historical methods and interpretative contextual analysis. The transformation of cultural goods further enforces a functional explanation of the relation and interaction of social elements (for example, actors, groups, institutions, constraints, and values). In that sense, cultural goods are objects of a cultural or aesthetical appreciation and incorporate immaterial surplus value. Thus, we apply philosophical, sociological, cultural and aesthetical insights in order to understand identities and the microstructure of actions. We integrate economic data and findings to explain industrial developments and the process of decision-making.

## **Conclusion**

We have discussed some specific problems within other already established fields such as cultural economics. We have explained how contextualism can enlarge the basic concepts of economics and open economic explanation to social and cultural issues. We have argued for a “practical turn” because the framework of social actions, the development of practical competences, and the exercise of professional knowledge are not always textual. The social research of cultural professions (see also Di Maggio 1987 and 1991) should be able to conceive the tacit dimension of action and explain the implicit reproduction of cultural practices. However, actions do not take place in “no man’s land”, but in a social space that is pre-structured through institutions. These institutions, as social systems, determine the formation of cultural goods and their transformation into commodities, appreciated objects, symbols of collective identities, and as integrated parts of the public space.

Our central claim is that the different aspects of cultural goods are interconnected in a constitutive sense. It is, therefore, misleading to select certain aspects by focusing the research on them without considering the interaction with the other aspects. Economic

analysis fails to understand the culture sector because it neglects its complexity. Cultural and sociological interpretations have traced ways to understand cultural goods as meaningful entities but in general they do not steer their research towards an explanation of economic aspects (for example, pricing, funding, decision constraints, framework of production and distribution, professional conditions).

The focus on such a broad research field demands a synthesis of cultural, sociological, organizational, and economic methods of analysis and interpretation in order to create a multi-perspective approach to the cultural institutions' sphere. However, culture is definitely not an object that may be observed and described from a distant, "scientific" point of view. Cultural issues are matters of public interest and are interwoven with normative and political positions. Cultural Institutions Studies does not claim objectivity and a positivistic analysis. But it is a necessity to enroll a discussion about presuppositions of research. This points to the philosophical roots of our approach.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Note of the Editors: While the term originally used by the authors for this article was culture institution studies, and is most likely a more perfect linguistic translation of the German term, the editors feel the less literal translation of cultural institution studies might be smoother and less apt to be confused with cultural studies.

<sup>2</sup> We deliberately do not use the term “cultural industries” because this term is mainly embedded in an economic view of the field. We indeed aim to emphasise the cultural sector’s various aspects.

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<sup>3</sup> Each theory of the symbolic and economic function of cultural goods presupposes an anthropological view as well as a sociological model with regard to communities of practice. Following Ernst Cassirer (1953), Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2002), Charles Taylor (1989), Ludwig Wittgenstein (1983), among others, we can conceptualize individuals primarily as acting persons within a social configuration. People have a different access to knowledge according to their enculturation, particular experiences, social position, and degree of empowerment. In addition, practical competencies and different attitudes are developed in relation to specific social environment. Therefore, acting, communication, sense giving, and all the activities that constitute everyday life always occur in a social configuration that we simply call culture.

<sup>4</sup> The cultural institutions' sphere should be perceived as more than the sum of its parts (organizations, persons, rules etc.), that is to say, as a *social gestalt*.

<sup>5</sup> Of course, all the mentioned activities are cultural. Thus, professional work in any field produces and reproduces culture. But if academic scholars have the deep desire to change the use of “cultural worker”, then they should answer the question, what sort of professional activity is not cultural?

<sup>6</sup> Wittgenstein mentions that rules “leave loop-holes open” – see Wittgenstein (1972, § 139), and Polanyi (1958, 81).