

Creative Labour: Towards a Renewed Research Agenda

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This article focuses on the role of creative labour, which has figured prominently in narratives of 'new capitalism' that promise to change standard employment relations and generate new modes of innovation. To move beyond such broad claims a more detailed picture of the characteristics and dynamics of work and employment of creative workers in different industries and groups is required. In this paper we begin by outlining our theoretical approach based on a combination of global production analysis, labour process analysis and a relational view of territorial networks. We proceed by examining the definitions used to define particular industries and workers as cultural or creative and then review recent analysis of work and employment relations in the cultural sector.

Keywords: critical political economy; labour process, organisations and popular culture; theories of identity; knowledge and power, place and location; talent management; design and creativity

Introduction

Creative and cultural industries and the “creative workers” employed within them are assigned roles of ever-increasing importance on a regional, national and international level. Despite definitional confusion as to exactly what constitutes these industries, they are regularly positioned as “national champions” in their own right (McKinlay and Smith, 2009:9) and as a key metaphor for successful mainstream organisations in general (Smith and McKinlay, 2009b:29). Creative workers are now also viewed as key drivers of regional economic development (Florida, 2002). Indeed Throsby (2008) describes the creative industries as an essential component in any respectable economic policy maker’s development strategy. There is, it is asserted, a growing creative intensity in the economy with a growing creative distinctiveness in the nature of work, career and management (Thompson et al., 2009a).

An increased demand for creative work is taken to demand less or different types of management, with creative workers being seen as representing a critical case for current developments in the workplace (knowledge economy/immaterial labour). Work in arts, cultural or creative industries is commonly viewed as desirable because it supposedly offers less alienating work, characterized by aesthetic and professional autonomy; a less formal and hierarchical work environment; and greater levels of social prestige. It is portrayed as noteworthy because the productive harnessing of workers’ subjectivities via more flexible forms of work organisation is viewed as the direction of more general employment dynamics in the complex and contingent world of work and employment. Over the last

two decades the view that the cultural or creative industries provide a 'template for new modes of working' (Oakley, 2009:27) has become common within both policy and academic discourse.

In a reading of recent Australia's national census data, Cunningham (2011) cites above average remuneration levels in the creative economy, except for musicians and performing artists, as a metonym for the experience of workers in these sectors. While often cited, such statistics reveal little about the quality and nature of creative industries work. There is currently a pointed debate over the employment and labour experiences of creative workers, with many arguing that the reality of creative work is one marked by insecurity, high levels of (self) exploitation and the corrosion of work-life demarcations, as the social networks of friends and family are put to work for business purposes. These conditions are reinforced by 'a widespread disavowal of those forms of organizing that were specifically designed to challenge such workplace discrimination' (Banks and Milestone, 2011:79). Moreover, an extension of freelance and contract work has affected the expectations of a new generation of young aspirants seeking to establish a career in the sector (Christopherson, 2009, 2011).

Despite the growing attention paid to these sectors and the people who work within them, there is little detailed research, particularly within Australia, on the work practices, orientations, attitudes, career trajectories, skills and training needs of creative workers. Indeed as Smith and McKinlay (2009a:18) conclude 'there is little insight into how [creative] workers gain access to or develop resources or how agency operates in dynamic and complex contexts'. A criticism of existing research on the careers of creative workers is that the majority of this work is bounded by art form or genre (mostly in the film and digital media sectors), and is reliant on problematic statistical data collections which measure primary occupations (Bennett, 2007; Brown, 2007; Throsby and Hollister, 2003). There is a need a need for 'bottom up' detailed picture of the characteristics and dynamics of work and employment of creative workers in different industries and groups (Thompson et al., 2009a; McGuigan, 2010).

In this paper we begin by outlining our theoretical approach. We proceed by examining the definitions used to define particular industries and workers as cultural or creative. We then review recent analysis

of work and employment relations in the cultural sector. We conclude with a brief discussion of how our theoretical framework can provide a renewed analytical focus on creative labour.

A note on definitions

There has been much confusion and disagreement regarding the terms creative and cultural industries. Different segments and sections have been included in definitions at different times, in different projects and in different countries. This has hampered analysis in general and comparative analysis in particular (Throsby, 2008). We note, moreover, that it is not just differences in the scope of categories that is at issue, but also some fundamental theoretical and normative differences (Garnham, 2005; Hesmondhalgh, 2007; Flew, 2011; Cunningham, 2009; Miller, 2009). Because of the term's currency and its likelihood to connect with a broad range of research currently being undertaken, we will open our discussion with the use of the term 'creative industries', allowing for the inclusion of both old and new sectors such as theatre and new media. Consistent with this term, we also adopt as a starting point Throsby's (2001) functional definition of cultural goods and services as activities that involve some form of creativity in their production; are concerned with the generation and communication of symbolic meaning; and from which any output at least potentially embodies some form of intellectual property. Throsby's definition aligns with other leading models (for example (Schimpf and Sereda, 2007; Higgs and Cunningham, 2008; Markusen, 2006) and as such provides a broad basis for discussion. Moreover his concentric circles model (Figure 1), which centres on 'the locus of origin of creative ideas ... radiating outwards as those ideas become combined with more and more outputs to produce a wider and wider range of products' (Throsby, 2001:112) provides a useful means of representing the industries and work environments that we want to examine. It is presumed that the cultural content of these industries' output will decline as one moves outwards through the concentric circles (Throsby, 2008:151) While this assumption about relative cultural value is problematic and needs to be tested (Cunningham, 2006; O'Connor, 2010; Bilton, 2010), the concentric circle model provides the basis on which to examine different trajectories of development that are in part explained by an increasing emphasis on commercial value, reproducibility and scale of production. To do so, we argue, requires moving beyond the usefully simple concentric circle model's assumptions of

'creativity' flowing outwards out from an artistic centre to examine how distinct industries are structured and govern their labour and commodification processes. For example, Throsby's model places *recorded* music and film in separate fields; yet, these two industries share similarities in terms of their organisational structure and logic of commodification that align them with elements of the print and publishing but set them apart from other industries within the wider cultural industries (Miège 2011). Such similarities are qualified, moreover, by the important difference that the scope for management's intervention within the music industry value chain is more numerous than that for film (Thompson et al., 2009a; Toynbee, 2003).

The problem of definitions premised on creativity extends to the notion of creative workers themselves. Drawing on labour process analysis we see all work as containing some degree of creativity (Thompson and Smith, 2010), and further the use of creativity alone as a defining characteristic tells us little about the nature of work (Smith and McKinlay, 2009a; McGuigan, 2010; Miller, 2009). For Thompson et al., (2009a) it is what is done by, with and to creative labour that counts. Creative work as non-standard, non-repeatable, innovative and newly imagined is rare, and most labour has its routine or familiar component. Caves (2000) argues that there is a greater totality in the productive process for creative workers, being involved in both conceptual and operative processes. It follows that in both the organization and character of creative industries work there will exist the inspired and the mundane, and that not all creative industries workers will undertake work that is recognised as equally creative. Here a critical, yet often overlook factor is the balance between recognised artistic labour and skilled 'craft' or artisanal practitioners (Banks, 2010b). The experience of such workers in the creative industries is such that the stresses between creative purpose and economic purpose (profit) are not overcome. Rather, they take a different, more complex, form. Therefore whilst stressing the difficulty of defining work by creative content, we argue that for certain sectors where the market is volatile and unpredictable, the product is highly perishable and must be, at least superficially, 'new', and where the act of creativity in production is difficult to standardise and routinise, the originality in creative labour may be accentuated and come to define a whole sector of work. How distinctions are made between different types of workers reflects not only patterns of self-

identification and work/industry practice but also shifts within wider social evaluation including importantly cultural policy fashions. One influential approach advocated by Throsby (2008:152) identifies a 'creative trident' comprising

Specialist workers: those employed in core creative occupations within creative industries;

Support workers: those employed in other occupations within the creative industries;

Embedded workers: those employed in core creative occupations within other industries

Analysing the creative industries: territorially embedded chains and networks

While most discussions of the creative industries in Australia arise from concerns about employment and economic contribution, the lack of definitional agreement hinders attempts at quantification. Australian census data (ABS, 2010) suggest that the creative industries sector employs around 315 thousand people (3.5 per cent of the Australian workforce), of whom 141,800 are specialist creative workers. With the inclusion of creative workers embedded in other economic sectors, employment nationally stands at just short of half a million people. Based on IBISWorld estimates (CIE, 2009), the creative industries in Australia contributed \$31.1 billion to GDP (for 2007-08) and had a long-term growth rate approaching double that of the economy as a whole.

The ABS data show that the majority of "creative industry businesses" in Australia are very small businesses or sole traders. While this has implications for work and employment patterns in its own right, the significance of the organisational structure of the creative industries for work and employment dynamics becomes more apparent once the involvement of a range of organisations is examined: small and medium sized enterprises; large organisations within the creative industries; and large organisations that live outside the formal creative industries themselves. The importance lies in the relationships within and between them and the manner in which inter-industry sequences allow for coordinating governance, the sharing (or offsetting) of risk, and forms of 'concentration without centralisation' (Harrison, 1994:8,47). While trust may characterise some of these relations, competitive accumulation constrains forms of mutuality (Thompson et al., 2009b).

Although we have adopted Throsby's (2008) concentric circles as a heuristic device to distinguish between sectors within the creative industries as a whole, the author himself acknowledges this is a static picture rather than a dynamic analysis. Hearn et al., (2007) develop the concept of the 'value creating ecology' as an alternative. Developed as an 'improvement' on supply chain and value chain analysis, a value creating ecology is taken to mean a constellation of firms which is dynamic and within which value flow is multidirectional and works through clusters of networks. Thompson et al. (2009a) are critical of work that treats too uncritically notions of knowledge economies and the dominance of flows of information (immateriality). In an examination of the popular music production sector, however, they outline a strength of value chain analysis: namely, that though indeterminacy of outcome may be a key to all specialist workers in creative industries, this, from a managerial point of view, can be dealt with at multiple points within the value chain, and crucially, that each sector will have its own organizational and developmental logic. As discussed further below, the Global Production Network offers important insights from both the ecology and chain frameworks (Coe and Johns, 2004; Johns, 2006, 2010; Thompson et al., 2009b; Yoon and Malecki, 2010; cf. Weller, 2008).

The approach permits work and employment patterns to be located within dynamic value chains that are themselves embedded with specific networks operating in and across different localities. The importance of place and locality has been acknowledged as vital to the creative industries from a variety of points of view (see Florida 2002, but see also Rainnie et al., 2007; Pratt, 2011). Smith and McKinlay (2009) acknowledge that the creative industries are differentiated economically and spatially, and by drawing on a framework that builds on Harvey's notions of the "spatial fix", "socio spatial dialectic" and the "politics of place" (McGrath-Champ et al., 2010) we will argue for a more grounded approach to the analysis of work and employment within the creative industries than has been developed hitherto.

Creative work

There is an increasing body of research focusing on the creative workforce, including people whose creativity is embedded in the activities of other industry sectors ; however the reliance on statistical

data that are fragmentary and incomplete has led to widespread calls for research that will increase understanding of specialist creative workers. Most research has stressed issues of strong commitment and identification with work, means of production and product. This has led to characterisation of creative work as a gift economy on the one hand or self-exploitation on the other. For management, a consistent feature of creative labour is that it is opaque, making it difficult to monitor and observe as well as codify and control, given the necessity for autonomy and creative space. For Banks (2010a) the history of cultural and creative industry production is marked by the tension between the need for artists to create an independent nexus of creativity, labour freedoms and skilled artisanal production while serving commercial masters, and, in the opposite direction, the necessity for managers of ensuring that those artistic freedoms are not destroyed, but appropriately harnessed and managed, sufficient to ensure the free flow of new and original cultural commodities.

Employment for specialist creative workers is intermittent, complex and challenging. Practitioners most often hold multiple jobs and the 'actor as waiter' is a well-known but indicative stereotype. With a focus on the arts, Throsby and Hollister (2003) conclude that only 30 per cent of artists meet their minimum income needs from their arts work, and non-arts work provides twice the amount of income for the same amount of committed time. Creative workers tend not to be paid for all of the work that they undertake. They often reduce or cease creative activities in their mid-thirties as career and residential mobility decline, and performing artists are much less likely than other creative workers to obtain skilled secondary positions through which they can sustain their presence in the creative industries. Smith and McKinlay (2009a:12) argue that getting into the creative industries is fiercely competitive, with performance or contest-based auditions for project-based short-term work contracts still strong in many fields. The same authors (2009b:40) suggest that creative industry characteristics include:

- A surplus of skilled over unskilled labour
- A productivity dilemma that means raising output requires engaging labour not replacing or displacing it
- A surplus of individuals wishing to join the industry relative to available places.

With these characteristics of uncertainty dominating, Blair (2009) points to the importance of ‘active networking’ for employees in the industry for initiating, developing and maintaining a career. Networks here being based on trust and friendship (Smith and McKinlay, 2009b). Drawing on the work of Bourdieu, Blair suggests that network boundaries are constantly shifting and that the process is conscious, informal, instrumental and ongoing. Individual actions within these networks are then a complex interaction between subjective understandings of the individual’s position and the constraints and opportunities presented by their objective social position. Questions of gender, class and race become of increasing importance. Indeed a number of writers have pointed to the potential discriminatory and exclusionary aspect to networks. Christopherson (2009) points to the resilience of white old boy networks in the US and in the UK, Smith and McKinlay (2009) point to a widening gender wage gap and young workers being forced to take up unpaid labour (see also Banks and Milestone, 2011; Warhurst and Eikhof, 2010; Lee, 2011). Reinforcing our focus on spatiality, Smith and McKinlay (2009a) call for a focus on networks in specific times in specific places.

Indeed, while these general features of creative work are now well rehearsed, the picture painted to date of work in the creative industries is too unidimensional, monochromatic and simplistic. There is a tendency to group together wildly disparate creative sectors. Given the range of industries in the four concentric circles covered by Throsby’s model, it is unlikely that all specialist creative workers in these sectors would exhibit the same work and employment characteristics. Indeed it is our contention that this is highly unlikely. Further we contend that each sector has its own logic, its own trajectory of development and therefore requires a specificity of analysis. Recent work has started to address these issues.

Work and employment relations in the cultural sector

In Australia, unions have long been obliged to deal with the dominance of intermittent freelance, contract and casual work in cultural and entertainment sectors (Markey, 1996; Dabscheck, 1996; Michelson, 1997) but these were viewed as aberrant from the standard employment relationship. However, the extent of “precarious” work (i.e. the marginally self-employed, sub-contracted, fixed-contract and particularly casualised labour) has increased in Australia, as elsewhere, and has been

associated with declining union membership density (Campbell, 2010). Internationally, while some argue that production and employment has become systematically more precarious (Thornley et al., 2010; Ross, 2009), others challenge the degree and experience of employment insecurity as a “new capitalism” shibboleth (Doogan, 2009); charting a middle position, Green (2007) finds no clear long-term secular trend in job insecurity but notes declining trends in worker discretion and autonomy coupled with the intensification of work for many employees. Green (2009) notes that what is at stake are important aspects of job quality such as pay, skill, effort, autonomy and security.

Given these real and purported trends across labour markets, the once peripheral figure of the cultural “practitioner” has become central as the “model entrepreneur” (Florida 2002) or the ‘new model worker –self directed, entrepreneurial, accustomed to precarious, non-standard employment, and attuned to producing career hits’ (Ross, 2009:10). As central character in new capitalism narratives, these are highly skilled and motivated workers for whom ‘[f]lexibility and adaptability describe qualities that have nothing to do with docility. The big person in a connectionist world is active and autonomous’ as opposed to the “little people” for whom flexibility is synonymous with domination (Boltanski & Chiapello 1999, p. 169 cited in Hoffmann et al., 2010). For such model entrepreneur-workers, collective representation and protective legislation is viewed with suspicion as unnecessary impositions on their individual creative autonomy; yet, such a vision is belied by the development of new forms of worker representation, even within the context of high levels of self-employment and freelance employment, as a reaction to the experiences of temporary, short-term, project-based work marked by long hours and unequal and fluctuating and unpaid work.

Despite uncertain career development paths marked by little job protection or security, the cultural sectors have experienced relatively low levels of unionisation. Nonetheless, critical media studies has renewed its focus on the role of cultural workers to organise and fight for better working conditions and the ability of their unions to respond to the pressures of work rationalisation and corporate concentration. Sharing a common concern about the effects of a neoliberal world economy on workers and work in the “knowledge economy”, Mosco and McKercher’s *The Laboring of Communication* and Ross’ *Nice Work If You Can Get It* engage centrally with questions of workers’ capacity for

collective struggle. Ross' focus is on what he views as the steady advance of contingency across labour markets and the manner in which increasingly precarious employment and its effects on working people. Specifically Ross notes that the experiential conditions associated with insecurity are shared by low end service workers and members of the "creative class": 'Post-industrial capitalism thrives on actively disorganizing employment and socio-economic life in general, so that it can profit from vulnerability, instability and desperation' (Ross 2009:51). Despite different positions within the labour market, and the often individualistic search for artistic freedom amongst the 'creative class', he argues that 'autonomy is not the opposite of solidarity' and poses the question of whether 'it make sense to imagine cross class coalitions of the precarious capable of developing a unity of consciousness and action on an international scale' (2009:6). Discussing the precariat in the United States, he notes that workers, predominantly young, female and ethnic, share the experiences of temporary contracts and isolation from a social insurance framework exacerbating more general uncertainty about their future.

Mosco and McKercher (2009; 2010; Mosco et al., 2010) also highlight the processes of casualisation and insecurity that increasingly mark the lives of knowledge workers. They note that responding to technological and industry convergence, and to a converging labour process, workers in the communication and information industries have come together in two major forms: in large integrated trade unions and in new forms of worker organization that resemble social movements. However, while they argue for the value of social movement unionism as an alternative to value-added unionism and business unionism (cf. Upchurch and Mathers, 2011; Dunn 2007), an equal if not stronger case is presented for the convergence of labour unions covering the knowledge workers within different sectors of the broad 'knowledge economy' (Mosco and McKercher, 2009, 2010). They too ask what are the prospects for building labour solidarity; if the scope of their question is more limited than that posed by Ross, their search for 'another type of politics' is nonetheless based on a catholic vision of the category of 'knowledge work;' that includes all workers within global value chains of the knowledge economy, one which embraces the production of both cultural content and technical and scientific outputs. Mosco and McKercher note that across these knowledge sectors increasingly

similar problems face workers: ‘control and resistance, precarity and creativity, self-interest and solidarity’ (2010:2).

Conclusion

In this article we have tried to outline an approach by which we can begin to analyse the contrasting and contradictory experience of ‘creative’ workers, be they specialized or not. We can start to answer the question posed by Thompson et al. (2009a) as to what exactly is done, by, with and to creative workers, and their reaction, individual or collective. We can locate the tensions between creativity, competition and profit within specific labour processes in specific places. Equally, we can begin to analyse the problems created for management in harnessing the skills of these workers to commercial outcomes. In the final analysis, our proposed approach draws together a number of existing approaches in a new way. This reflects the nature of the work and workers in question. They are neither a completely new category nor doing dramatically new or different things but we do need an approach that can actually analyse what they *are* doing without resorting to myth or fantasy.

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