Spaces for Creativity? Skills and Deskilling in Cultural and High-Tech Industries

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Over the last three decades, economic geographers and social scientists from various theoretical veins have suggested a fundamental transformation of capitalism, from Fordist mass production and Taylorist divisions of labor to post-Fordism and flexible specialization. More recent debates about the creative industries and creative cities (cf. Scott 2006) – and not least Richard Florida's (2002; 2014) concept of the 'creative class' can be seen as an extension of investigations into late capitalism's evolution to what Scott (2012) among others called cognitive-cultural capitalism. In these transformationist views, changes in the labor process and the overall composition of the workforce are one of the main elements of analysis, along with changes in intra-firm and inter-firm industrial organization and the fragmentation of production and markets.

Some of this literature, most notably Florida's work, assumes that cultural and high-tech industries are qualitatively different from more labor-intensive manufacturing and service industries in that the skills in the former are much less likely to be standardized and an increasing proportion of the workforce is required to carry out multiple, creative and cognitive tasks. There are, of course, critical responses to the rise of the creative class (cf. Peck 2005) that have emphasized the negative impacts of, for instance, gentrification in creative cities through the influx of a highly paid workforce comprising of 'symbolic analysts' (Scott 2012), relying on a 'service underclass' (ibid) while at the same time displacing it and other parts of

the working class by pricing them out on the housing market. Critics of Florida's ideas have also pointed at the precarious nature of creative labor for large segments of the workforce. Precarity in high-tech and creative industries has mostly been analyzed through the lens of unfair contracts, intensifying Schumpeterian competition, voluntary self- exploitation and related themes, but rarely addressing the labor process itself, albeit with some notable exceptions (cf. McKinley and Smith 2009; Thompson, Parker and Cox 2015).

In light of this, and given the growing importance of immaterial labor in the global economy, shifting geographies of creative and high-tech industries, and changing technologies of material as well as knowledge production (cf. van Eekelen 2014), we therefore call for more explicit engagement with this research area. This paper and the subsequent seven articles of the Special Issue aim to make a substantial contribution to such an engagement and tackle two common misconceptions concerning the relationship between industrial labor and creative labor: its division in production, and a neat linear teleology of economic restructuring. Returning to Braverman's deskilling thesis we demonstrate and critically interrogate the salience of these points in the creative industries and high tech work.

Geographies of skills, creativity and the labor process

Until very recently, it was often assumed that workers in cultural industries enjoyed a high level of freedom from corporate power because the creativity essential to cultural industries can be maximised in a liberal environment. Various studies also maintained that the relationships among fellow workers in such industries fell outside rigid corporate hierarchy and were therefore more collaborative and egalitarian (McRobbie, 2002; Ursell, 2000). These depictions of cultural industries are reminiscent of earlier authors' views on clusters of small

and medium-sized firms in high-tech industries. It has become almost a cliché that academics quit universities to start innovative firms and the best students from the top universities drop out of school to make gadgets from their garages or invent the next 'disruptive' technology. Large corporations with hierarchical structures, in this view, are not the main drivers of the industries but rather the source of small firm spin-offs. The innovative entrepreneurs' labour in turn is seen not as exploited capitalist labour, but as a creative process more akin to art (Kunda, 2006; Saxenian, 1994). These optimistic perceptions of cultural and high-tech industries, now often lumped together under the term *creative industries*, persuaded many policy-oriented academics to see the encouragement of such industries as an alternative to more traditional regional development policies (Castells, 1994; Choi and Cho, 2015; Chung and Alcácer, 2002; Li and Duan, 2018; Markusen, 2013) – despite the fact that the success of such policies is known to be rare (Sonn et al., 2017).

More recently, critical commentators on the new industries have begun to present evidence that casts doubt on some of the often overly positive perceptions (sometimes amounting even to romanticization) of creative labour. For instance, Banks (2010) has shown that the autonomy of creative work, which stems from the absence of long-term employment contracts and which some proponents of the creative class – such as Florida (2002) – celebrate, is really enjoyable only for a small fraction of creative workers who are unusually well regarded and well connected within the industry. The rest of the workforce actually cannot enjoy this autonomy, because they suffer as a result of the absence of stability (Ross, 2006; Terranova, 2000). For example, the collapse of the traditional contract system caused by the arrival of the mp3 player has put musicians in a situation in which they constantly have to look for new opportunities for gigs and find ways to distinguish themselves from their numerous competitors, without the help of well-established record labels (Hracs, 2012; Hracs and Leslie, 2014).

Contrary to public perception, the freedom to choose when and where to work can be a source of exploitation. The cut-throat competition common in cultural and high-tech industries forces workers to meet deadlines by working excessively long hours. Similarly, homeworking is not necessarily beneficial to workers, since it breaks the spatial boundary between work and life. What looks like a spatially and temporally liberated form of work is often, ultimately, the encroachment of work upon the time and space of life (cf. Drotner, 2008).

The egalitarian, collaborative environment that is supposedly an outcome of the absence of a traditional corporate hierarchy can also be a source of frustration. A collaborative environment is not a given: the workers need to make the effort to create one. That means suppressing preferences toward individual colleagues and hiding personal emotions. For these reasons, it can be argued that at the core of cultural labour there is emotional labour (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2008; Warren, 2014; Watson and Ward, 2013). These criticisms of cultural industries are, once again, similar to critiques of the ways in which high-tech clusters are conceived (Massey et al., 1992). The precariat phenomenon as for instance analysed by Standing (2011) is clearly evident in creative industries, too (Morgan and Nelligan, 2018).

Given the harsh conditions of flexible labour, we contend that often such flexibility is not chosen by creative workers but imposed on them by capital. In fact, some studies have already concluded that a majority of creative workers would actually prefer more traditional, secure, long-term employment, but employers increasingly prefer systems of outsourcing and short-term labour contracts, which allow them to avoid the costs associated with a permanent labour force (Banks, 2007; Gill, 2007; Perrons, 2003). In the past, controlling workers' whereabouts and overseeing their work at the workplace on a full time basis was seen by capital as the best way to control labour (Giddens, 1985, 1986). This method of control, however, incurs large costs because of the need to supervise workers and to pay them for times when

they are not actually working. The slowest worker slows down the entire production system, but workers who are not working at maximum efficiency still have to be paid full salaries. To retain the workforce, capital must provide various securities, such as health insurance and a pension plan. This system can be viewed as a compromise between capital and labour, as Aglietta (2000) and Clarke (1988) and many others have shown. However, from the point of view of capital, this is only the second-best option.

In an effort to avoid these disadvantages, there have been numerous experiments in labour organization, forms of employment and systems of labour control (cf. Lewis, 1998; Meiksins, 1988). After a few decades of trial and error, it seems now possible to control the quantity and quality of products, without allowing workers to enjoy stable, long-term employment contracts, a phenomenon aptly described by Brophy and de Peuter's (2007: 180) notion of 'flexible exploitation.' A consequence of this triumph of capital is the rise of temporary staffing industries (cf. Coe et al., 2011), the recent ascent of 'platform capitalism' (Langley and Leyshon, 2017) and the 'gig economy' (Graham et al. 2017). Heralded by their proponents as new forms of flexible work that supposedly match the requirements of a changing labor market with the assumed desires of individuals and families for less rigid working times, such a view glosses over the precariousness of this form of employment, increasing work intensity, and the implications for the work-life balance of individuals and families (cf. James 2017). These issues are also highlighted by critical accounts of the ascent of digital platforms and the digital economy, often euphemistically framed as 'sharing economy' and portrayed as an alternative to mainstream capitalism, while at the same time remaining very much part of an economy dominated by monopoly capital (cf. Cockayne 2016; Richardson 2015, 2018).

The Creative Work / Manual Work Dichotomy

Even though they focus on what are in many ways opposing aspects of creative labour, the proponents of creative industries and their critics share one fundamental assumption: creative work is distinct from work in an industrial mass production system. Behind this dichotomy, we can detect two deeper tendencies.

The first is the tendency to treat the concept of creative work as distinct from that of industrial work (perceived as real-world work) in some industrial sectors. The two kinds of work, in their ideal types, are certainly different as the creation of ideas is different from the manual assembly of things. Creative industries in the real world, however, usually incorporate both idea creation and manual assembly. For example, Apple's product design is dependent on the manual assembly of its products at Foxconn factories in China. This can be true even in the art sector. For example, British artist Damien Hirst is known to work with a large crew of assistants whose work is manual. This dependence on manual labour is even clearer in the work of Ai Wei Wei, whose "Sunflower Seeds" are made of 100 million hand-carved, seed-shaped stones. In smaller-scale cultural production, such as small-scale tailors or small furniture design shops, the person performing the creative work is usually also responsible for the manual work. These familiar examples clearly show that there is no such thing as a purely creative industrial sector. This tendency to confuse ideal-type creative work with the real-world creative industry sector is relatively straightforward to understand. The second underlying trend we wish to examine, however, requires explanation. To understand it, we need to look at the historical context of economic geography and other social sciences.

The second tendency underlying mainstream conceptualisations of creative industries is the transformation model of the progress of history. It is certainly true that the creative sectors'

share in the global economy has increased over the last few decades. But it is quite another matter to assume there has been an irreversible, global transformation from an era of mass production industries to a new era of creative industries. This represents a continuation of earlier discussions of the economic geography of high-tech clusters. In the 1980s and 90s, economic geographers investigated the geographical manifestations of new capitalism, manifestations which most geographers at the time referred to as *industrial districts*, a concept coined by Becattini (1989). Variants on this concept included the new industrial space (Scott, 1988), the technology district (Storper, 1997), and the innovative milieu (Camagni, 2005). In this context, it was often often claimed that cultural and high-tech workers in industrial districts and creative clusters could avoid deskilling by out-speeding the tendency towards standardization. This theory dominated the discipline of economic geography throughout the 1990s.

For industrial district and creative milieu scholars, changes in the labour process and in the overall composition of the workforce are among the main elements of analysis, along with changes in intra-firm and inter-firm industrial organization and the fragmentation of production and markets. Recent debates about the emergence and role of creative industries in regional and global economic development are among the latest contributions to the discourse on the transformation of capitalism. The growing body of work on creative industries and creative cities (cf. Scott, 2000) is, in many ways, an extension of previous investigations into the evolution of late capitalism. However, many more recent empirical studies suggest that the "new era" is not going to arrive that quickly, as outlined earlier in this paper. We suspect that there has been a certain degree of "theory-ladenness of observation." The *a priori* assumption of a dichotomy between manual and creative work, and the privileging the latter over the former, can easily lead researchers to focus on the latter. This can, in turn, cause them to exclude or

marginalize evidence that tells a different story. There is growing evidence that, since the 1980s, job creation in 'typical' knowledge-intensive sectors has often been focused on low-skill, information-handling occupations, rather than creative work as it is commonly conceived (Fleming et al., 2004; Thompson et al., 2001). Livingstone (1998) has also highlighted discrepancies between formal levels of education obtained and the skills performed during employment, which raise further doubts about the real character of certain industries and occupations branded as 'creative' and 'knowledge rich'. Technological advancement in media industries, while creating more positions for versatile 'all-rounders', also produces a considerable number of jobs involving standard tasks, such as push-button and pre-determined input (Banks, 2010). This is not a problem which has only arisen with the emergence of post-Fordism in the twentieth century. The question of what constitutes creativity, craft knowledge and artisanal skills, and how these skills become subsumed into increasingly standardized processes, can be traced back at least to the Renaissance period in Europe, a topic explored by de Munck (this issue).

Our sceptical view of the dichotomy of manual and creative work prompts us to ask several questions: 1) How much manual work is there in the creative industry sectors? 2) is the transition to a creative economy irreversible? 3) Are creative industries alternatives to traditional economic development strategies, based on manual work? 4) Are there ways to keep creative labour creative? We attempt to answer some of these questions by revisiting the labour process debate of the 1970s, focusing particularly on Braverman's (1974) contribution, which has been somewhat side-lined by the excitement about creativity which began in the 1980s.

Revisiting Harry Braverman in a Creative Industry Context

Debates about work and the capitalist labour process can be traced back to Karl Marx's *Grundrisse* (1857) and *Das Kapital* (1867), in which he writes about the transformation of artisanal labour – labour 'immersed in its particular specificity' (1857/1993: 296) – into abstract labour, in the expanding factory system. Building on this tradition, Braverman's (1974) *Labor and Monopoly Capital* ignited debates about deskilling and the degradation of work. Braverman systematically demonstrates how industrial capitalism seized control over the labour process, through a separation of conception and execution that polarised the workforce. The workers responsible for execution, who form the majority of the workforce, do not need to acquire high-level skills. The separation of conception from execution therefore results in the skill degradation and deskilling of the majority and the concentration of skills among a small minority of workers, thereby rendering workers interchangeable and thus disposable, and significantly weakening their power to negotiate.

Like most influential works, *Labor and Monopoly Capital* generated controversy and rebuttals. Braverman's critics raised various issues, such as his failure to consider worker subjectivity and the ways in which gender and race affect the labour process (Burawoy, 1979; Crompton and Jones, 1984; O'Doherty and Willmott, 2009; Thompson and Smith, 2009). However, no one disputed that the separation of conception from execution is one of the main strategies for controlling labour under capitalism. The belief that creative work is fundamentally different from industrial work has arguably led Braverman's work to be largely side-lined from analyses of creative and high-tech work.

As mentioned above, the discussion of creative industries in the 1980s began by examining the ways in which workers in such industries regain their skills. However, despite

the mounting evidence that we cited in the first section of this paper, there have been few attempts to re-examine Harry Braverman's deskilling thesis and apply it to creative industries.

In this context, Chen and Sonn (this issue) have mobilised a grounded case study to show that the supposedly clear line between creative and manual work can be blurred, penetrated and transcended. By demonstrating how the labour process shifts back and forth in response to contingent factors, they have been able to prove that Braverman's logic can also be applied to creative industries. Leslie and Rantisi (this issue), in their analysis of standardisation and corporatisation at the Cirque du Soleil, which is usually seen as a beacon of creative work, also demonstrate the potential for the deskilling and regimenting of formerly autonomous creative labour. Yoon (this issue) shows that, under certain local conditions, corporate strategies can control creative labour in ways not unlike the way in which they control industrial labour.

Despite this, we are not calling for a full and uncritical return to Braverman's deskilling thesis, as the content and organization of work is not only determined by technology and management leadership. Market-specific conditions and technological and spatial corporate strategies can be equally important, in what Peck (2017: 205) describes as "islands of […] upskilling in an ocean of deskilling", and can make skill transformation a contingent, nonlinear and sometimes even fuzzy process (cf. Machacek and Hess, this issue; Comunian and England, this issue). Other corporate and spatial strategies can also promote the avoidance of deskilling and the maintenance of a meaningful degree of worker autonomy, as Richardson and Bissell (this issue) illustrate in their study of co-working spaces in Manchester, Cambridge and London. What we see, then, is a variegated landscape of skills and creativity in cultural and high-tech industries that contains new spaces of creative labor but at the same time also reflects new forms and geographies of deskilling and precarious work.

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