



MEDIA INDUSTRIES, LABOUR AND PRODUCTION

LECTURE 4 – MEDIA LABOUR II: AUTONOMY, ALIENATION & RESISTANCE

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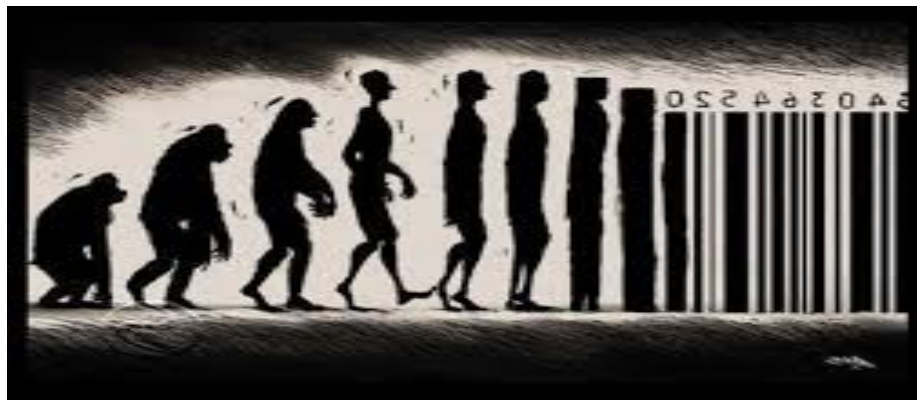
COMMODIFICATION AND LABOUR

Capitalism

- means of production, distribution and exchange are in private hands → Two classes: property owners and propertyless workers
- Sales of goods and services in (relatively) free and competitive market
- Spreads through commodification.

Two implications:

- Commodity fetishism – labour as invisible
- The commodification of labour itself – labour as something to be bought and sold



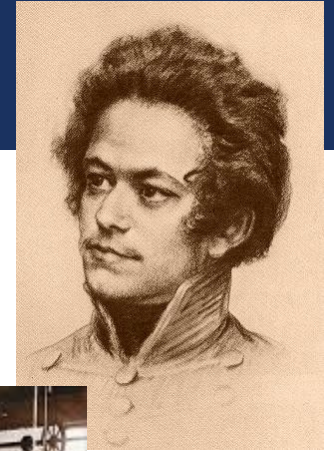
KARL MARX (1844) AND ALIENATION

Two key concepts:

- Alienation is to ... turn away, divert, transfer ownership
- Estrangement is to ... turn away in feeling or connection

Labour is alienated from:

- ...the objects of its production
- ...the production process itself
- ... its own 'species being' (and from each other too)



ROBERT BLAUNER (1964) AND ALIENATION

Four types of alienation:

1. Powerlessness, control, manipulation (by others or systems)
2. Meaninglessness (relationship to product, process and organisation of work)
3. Isolation (lack of sense of belonging/community)
4. Self-estrangement, boredom and low self-esteem

→ Turning people “into things”

→ Fragmentation in people’s existence and consciousness



ALIENATION AND CREATIVE LABOUR

Is creative labour (potentially) less alienated than other forms of labour?

“In non-alienated conditions, people have the ability and potential to act, consciously and with the use of abstract thought and imagination, to change nature and their surroundings. This labour, then, is creative; it arises out of human needs and intentions, it is freely exercised on its object and it is constructive and transformative”. (Wolff, 1981: 14).

However, as “work in general increasingly lost its character as ‘free, creative labour’, artistic work came to be seen as ‘*really* creative’”. (ibid:19)

...what is it about this work that is less alienating than other forms of work?

- Intrinsic motivation
- Art expresses inner self or culture
- Associated with pleasure and satisfaction (Ross, 2009)

AUTONOMY

To be autonomous =

“to be one’s own person, to be directed by considerations, desires, conditions, and characteristics that are not simply imposed externally upon one, but are part of what can somehow be considered one’s authentic self”

(Chrisman 2009, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy - online)

“Commerce (or capital) cannot make the artist completely subservient to economics because symbol creation remains ideologically centred on the expressive individual artist.”

(Ryan 1992)

Four stages of cultural production (Ryan, 1992):

1. Creation (relatively *loose* control)

- Conception (writing, composing, designing)
- Execution (performance)
- Completion of master (editing/mixing for books, music, film etc.)

2. Reproduction (*tight* control)

- Duplication/printing into the form to be consumed

3. Circulation (*tight* control)

- Marketing (market research, ads, packaging)
- Publicity
- Distribution and/or broadcast

4. Retail/exhibition/broadcast (*tight* control)

CRITICAL VIEWS OF AUTONOMY



- Autonomy as compromised (and ultimately eliminated) by commercial cultural production
 - Adorno and Horkheimer: Culture Industry

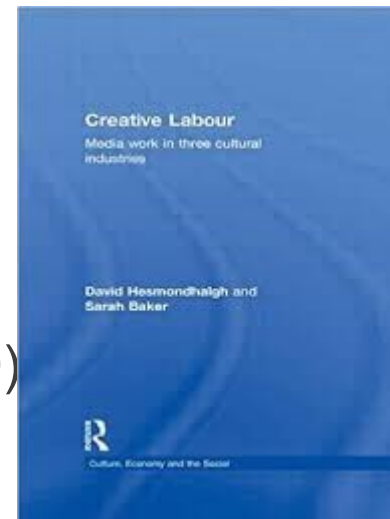
- Autonomy as 'manipulation' and illusion
 - Foucault: Governmentality

- Autonomy as pretence
 - Bourdieu: Field theory

WHAT KIND OF AUTONOMY?

- **Workplace Autonomy** = degree of self-determination of workers within a certain work situation
- **Creative Autonomy** = degree to which art/knowledge/culture can/should operate independently of the influence of other determinants
 - Aesthetic/artistic autonomy
 - Professional autonomy

Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011:40)



SUMMARY

Creative work arguably characterised by:

- Low degree of alienation
- High degree of autonomy

→ Different to other types of work?

- Creative autonomy = ground for conflict and negotiation
- Resilient despite intense marketisation of cultural production
- Autonomy and lack of alienation as trade-off for work security and exploitative conditions?

IS MEDIA WORK GOOD WORK?

- Challenging realities of creative labour markets
 - Precarity, insecurity, exploitation
 - Emotional demands and immaterial nature
 - Problematic characteristics in equality, diversity and accessibility (Gender, Race, Disability, Class, Age)
- Yet, a particular appeal
 - Creativity, autonomy, individualisation, flexibility, self-actualisation ...
- Can media work be 'good' work?
 - Another kind of freedom? One that seeks to moderate and challenge market culture rather than simply reinforce it?
 - How about the *ethics* and *values* attached to cultural work?

HESMONDHALGH AND BAKER: A MODEL OF GOOD AND BAD WORK

- Aims to define and measure “good” work in terms of the “experience of individual workers”
- Building on concepts concerned with freedom and purpose (such as alienation, autonomy, self-realisation) as well as working conditions (incl. security, wages, work-life balance)
- Normative framework: social justice (incl. social division of labour) and well-being of self and others (incl. contribution to common good)
- Additional dimension: Quality of (cultural) product/service
 - Level of quality (inferior – excellent)
 - Contribution to common good (increase or diminish the well-being of others in society)

HESMONDHALGH AND BAKER: A MODEL OF GOOD AND BAD WORK

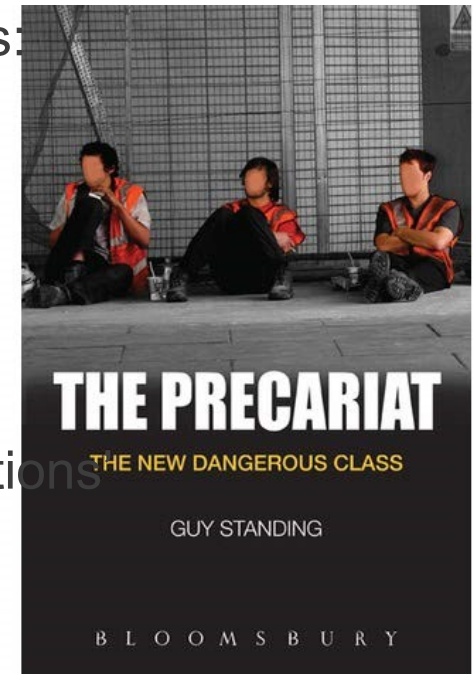
	Good work	Bad work
Process	Good wages, working hours, high levels of safety	Poor wages, working hours, safety
	Autonomy	Powerlessness
	Interest and involvement	Boredom
	Sociality	Isolation
	Self-esteem	Low self-esteem and shame
	Self-realisation	Frustrated development
	Work-life balance	Overwork
	Security	Insecurity and risk
Product	Excellent products	Low-quality products
	Products contributing to common good	Products failing to contribute to the well-being of other

GROWING RESISTANCE?

- Growing awareness of and anger at social inequality as a result of financial crisis and austerity
- Some signs of resistance in cultural work but very little activism from workers themselves.
- Challenges for organised resistance:
 - Dispersed/fluctuating workforce/lack of community
 - Individualisation
 - Hope and fear
- Greig de Peuter (Beyond the Model Worker: Surveying a Creative Precariat, 2014): three key areas where cultural workers are resisting the dominant logic of neoliberal development
 1. emerging flexworker organisations in which a (quasi) employment status, rather than a particular occupation or sector, is the basis of aggregation and advocacy
 2. unpaid work as a point of contention in a variety of creative economy quarters, a grievance dovetailing with diverse compensation proposals
 3. precarious cultural workers' involvement in wider social movement politics, in particular, the politics of occupation

PRECARIOUS LABOUR

- Problems of precarious work for workplace resistance to bad conditions:
 - Fear of losing jobs (current and future)
 - Hope for future betterment/rewards
 - Fluctuation of staff leads to lack of community (and organised action)
 - Individualisation
- Rise of 'precariat' – bringing together those who face 'precarious conditions'
- But: Internalisation of practices and discourses



GRASSROOTS ACTIVISM



- **Flexworker organisation** (networks, co-ops, collectives, ...): support for fragmented and isolated flexible workforce
- **Free labour and Low/no pay activism:** Discontent at zero-wage margins of the creative economy (e.g. spec-work, zero-hour contracts, deferred pay...)
- **(Unpaid) internships:** The injustice of unpaid internships, together with fact that in many cases they could be found to be illegal, meant that internships became a sort of lightning rod for wider problems. Not just a problem of exploitation but also of social exclusion and privilege
- **Equality:** inequality of media labour market concerning income, recruitment and career progression, linked to gender, class, race, age...

Nevertheless: "A survey commissioned by Shooting People found that 81% of its members wanted to see postings for unpaid jobs. 86% were prepared to work unpaid and 78% objected to being told they cannot choose to work for nothing."

GRASSROOTS ACTIVISM: EXAMPL



will work
social
for change

- New **co-ops and collectives** focused on precarity and flexible work: e.g. Carrotworkers' Collective, Precarious Workers Brigade, Cultural Workers Organize, Freelancers' Union (NY)
- Other forms of **support and community building** for people in non-standard work arrangements by enabling collaboration, network building and co-working: e.g. Shooting People, "Hubs" and shared office space,
- **Internships**: e.g. Internocracy.org, GraduateFog.co.uk, Internaware.org and Internsanonymous.co.uk
- **Research**: de Peuter, Cohen, & Saraco (2013) on shared work spaces for a fragmented even isolated workforce, Perlin (2012) and de Peuter, Cohen & Brophy (2012) on internships, Terranova (2000) on free labour
- Occupy (the politics of occupation) and other **grassroots movements against social injustice**: Multiple organisations/sub-groups, e.g. <http://occupydesign.org.uk/>, <http://occupylondon.org.uk/>, <https://theoccupiedtimes.org/>, united by same political concern, dependent on collaboration and activism (another form of free labour?)

OTHER WAYS OF RESISTANCE AND CHANGE...

- Trade unions – they exist but do they matter?
 - Legal and public representation
 - Collective bargaining – e.g. set (recommended) rates of pay, strike action
 - Lobbying – e.g. provide policy response and advice
 - Information, guidance, and resources – e.g. workers' rights , tax, copyright
 - Training
 - But: production outside union agreements, workers' waiving rights in individual contracts...
- Labour policy and creative industry policy
 - Shift in policymaking from the central state, to a wider -range of partnerships, networks and para-statal bodies.
 - Focus on small business support (not labour)
 - Problem of representation: who is included in policy making process?

FINAL THOUGHTS

- Reality of media labour markets is challenging for workers – exploitative conditions and high levels of insecurity are common
- Yet, media work can offer opportunities for non-alienated, autonomous, artistic work
- Policy and industry discourses facilitate attraction of media work and acceptance of bad conditions
- Is it good or bad work? – highly subjective and diverse
- New politics of the precarious? – Considering the difficulties in organising flexible, precarious labour, is activism sustainable and can it lead to real change?