Chapter VIII

Creative London?
Investigating New Modalities of Work in the Cultural Industries

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Abstract

This chapter considers the emergence of the discourse of creativity in contemporary economic, political, and social life, and the characteristics of emerging labour markets in the cultural industries. In particular it is concerned with analysing the working experiences of a number of individuals working in the cultural industries in London. Using a critical theoretical framework of understanding, it examines the importance of cultural capital, subjectivisation, governmentality, network sociality, and individualization as key concepts for understanding the experience of labour in the creative economy. This chapter considers how creative individuals negotiate the precarious, largely freelance, deregulated and de-unionised terrain of contemporary work. As the economic becomes increasingly inflected by the cultural in contemporary social life, the terrain of experience of individuals...
working in these expanding sectors has been neglected in cultural studies. This chapter seeks to critically intervene in this area, arguing that the “creative” turn in contemporary discourse can be seen to mask emergent inequalities and exploitative practices in the post-industrial employment landscape.

Introduction

Everywhere we turn in contemporary society, we are being encouraged to be creative. In today’s “knowledge economy,” where we are told we are “living on thin air” (Leadbeater, 1999) the imperative to be creative has taken on the ideological force of a moral edict: something that we should all aspire to. Influential political literature tells us that we are living in the “Creative Age” (Bentley & Seltzer, 1999), commentators speak of the rise of the “creative class” (Florida, 2002) and businesses are told to display “creative leadership” (Guntern, 1998). Indeed creativity is no longer presented as a choice in such discourse; it becomes compulsory if one is to survive the vicissitudes of global capitalism. A vast plethora of books from self-help literature to popular psychological literature as well as an extensive range of discursive political activity seeks to assure us that creativity is something that we can all achieve, if only we try. As Osborne (2003) argues, “in psychological vocabularies, in economic life, in education and beyond, the values of creativity have taken on the force of a moral agenda” (p. 507).

Creativity, as a key structural necessity of cultural production, has come to be seen as a constitutive element of the contemporary economy. One of the defining features of our times is the ever-increasing fusion of the cultural with the economic within society (see Jameson, 1991; Lash & Urry, 1994). Ours is an economy of “signs and spaces,” increasingly dominated by the media, by brands, by advertising, in short by signifying practices. As Lash and Urry (1994) argue “[e]conomic and symbolic processes are more than ever interlaced and interarticulated; that is… the economy is increasingly culturally inflected and … culture is more and more economically inflected” (p. 64). The structural needs of late capitalism demand creative workers in a wide range of areas. The huge growth in the creative industries is concomitant with the emergence of the notion of the creative economy. As such, Wang (2004) claims that “‘[c]reativity’ is redefined as an enterprise sector, intrinsic, not external, to the contemporary technologically-accented knowledge economy” (p. 11). In contemporary society creativity becomes a central element of the discursive regime of the new economy, in which the demands on the individual to demonstrate flexibility, entrepreneurship, and innovation have taken on the hegemonic power of ideology.
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