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Labor, entrepreneurialism and the creative economy in neoliberal times

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***Be Creative: Making a Living in the New Culture Industries* by Angela McRobbie (Polity Press, 2016)**

Discussions about workers and the fashion industry are typically framed around the impacts of economic globalization upon exploited garment workers in the Global South. While this remains an important site of critical debate, the labor experience of European and British “creatives” working in the cultural fields of fashion (and the arts more generally) are often not understood as having a labor politics at all. Those who labor in creative fields (e.g. fashion, design, music, visual art) are not generally considered to be workers. Their toil is often assumed to be on the basis of passion and lifestyle, and their suffering therefore self-inflicted.

Feminist cultural studies scholar Angela McRobbie's recent publication, *Be Creative: Making a Living in the New Culture Industries* (2016), makes it clear that those laboring in the cultural sector *are workers*, and explores the implications of emerging forms of labor in the new neoliberal "creative economy." McRobbie contends that social scientists must urgently "rethink the sociology of employment" in order to come to terms with the large group of workers who are self-employed, casuals, short-term project workers and/or underemployed (2016, 4). McRobbie makes it clear that although this creative labor shift may appear to be a choice, the reality of work in the neoliberal "new economy" is that most cultural workers have little choice: job security is no longer the reward for hard work. Precarious work, for most in the culture industries, is all that there is left.

Accordingly, McRobbie focuses on the public euphoria surrounding the creative labor market in Europe and the United Kingdom, canvassing the period from the UK's New Labour winning office in 1997, to the Global Financial Crisis in 2008.¹ The creative labor market is a set of (mostly) middle class individuals with ambitions of having careers in fashion, the arts, music, communications media or design. They tend to be university educated, and often work extremely long (and often unpaid) hours in order to develop and promote their creative careers.

McRobbie's academic work has been based in feminist cultural theory since the 1970s, and *Be Creative* draws upon some of her previous research into independent fashion designers in London and Berlin, as well as club and rave scenes in the UK. *Be Creative* adds to McRobbie's strong publication record in the critical analysis of fashion culture—well-known previous titles include *British Fashion Design: Rag Trade or Image Industry?* (1998), and *In the Culture Society* (1999). While *Be Creative* is about cultural workers as a conglomerate group, many of her examples come specifically from the fashion trade in the United Kingdom and Germany. McRobbie makes it clear that this text is not an empirical analysis of a particular group of workers, or a set of policy recommendations. Instead it operates as a theoretical analysis of a broad attitudinal pattern in the Global North: the uncritical "romance" surrounding the idea of creative labor (2016, 38).

At the core of McRobbie's argument is that a form of "labor reform by stealth" has occurred, which encourages this cohort of creative graduates into insecure and unsupported forms of labor (2016, 58). In the neoliberal economy this group is explicitly encouraged to "be creative" (and to that I would add, be "innovative").² Being creative means the self-monitoring of career pathways, pursuing risky and individualistic entrepreneurial endeavors, and cultivating the image of an individual creative practitioner as a marketable brand. Creativity is understood specifically in terms of its contribution to commercial enterprise and profit-making.

Moving beyond merely observing that this is a social pattern, McRobbie then asks what are the instruments that encourage this "flight" towards creative sectors, and how is it that the more negative sides of this kind of work are so often glossed over, in favor of a glamorized, hipster and upbeat

representation of working life in the cultural sectors. In other words, what forces have transformed the deprivations of this style of working into a desirable “line of flight”? (2016, 58)

McRobbie explains this phenomenon with reference to Michel Foucault’s concept of the *dispositif*. The *dispositif* is a:

heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions ... regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures ... the system of relations that can be established between the elements. (Foucault 1980, 194, cited in McRobbie 2016, 38)

It operates in a way that encourages individuals into decisions and actions that self-monitor, self-regulate, and require very little support from the state. Focusing on the UK, McRobbie points to two particularly pervasive forms of the *dispositif* of the creative economy: popular media and tertiary education.

Some of the examples of popular media McRobbie selects include magazines such as *Vice*, *i-D*, and *Dazed and Confused*, which, she argues, are “remarkably disengaged.” These publications celebrate and promote the arrival of the creative economy, to the point of even encouraging people to work multiple jobs, lose sleep and essentially suffer through their precarious situation (McRobbie 2016, 27). The most obvious example is a quote McRobbie provides from *i-D* magazine: “Fashion multi-taskers: ... Once you’ve tried doing four jobs you’ll never want anything less” (Rushton 2001, quoted in McRobbie 2016, 27).

According to McRobbie, another key part of the *dispositif* is education and, more specifically, the “creative university” and art school models, which draw upon American business school methods and values (2016, 186–188). McRobbie’s discussions about the role of tertiary education rang particularly true for me. Teaching and researching in a design and architecture school, I see hundreds of undergraduate design and fashion students preparing to “launch” their careers from the early stages of their degrees. Fashion shows and exhibitions feature a constant undercurrent of anxiety about being “discovered,” and students cultivate branded identities early, through social media, websites and carefully crafted business cards placed adjacent to their exhibited work.

McRobbie—a cultural studies scholar originally from the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS)—is keenly aware of the way in which the teaching of cultural studies and the arts has been co-opted as a form of work-preparation in the creative industries. Students are encouraged to find ways to commercialize their creative activities, and specifically warned to prepare for project work, casual contracts and unpaid internships. For McRobbie this is a major point of tension for her own educational role, and she sees it as imperative that cultural studies retain its critical voice and not be swallowed up by the creativity *dispositif*. This is one key reason why McRobbie has retained the use of the

word “culture” rather than “creativity”—and specifically deploys it in her book’s subtitle: *Making a Living in the New Culture Industries*. Although McRobbie does not align herself with Theodor Adorno’s particular take on the culture industries (1991 [1944]) (she does not agree with the “inevitable banalization” of culture), her use of the word *culture* deliberately retains a link to the Marxist legacies of both the Frankfurt and Birmingham schools. This allows some space for critical dialogue, whereas she argues that “creativity,” as a term, has been utterly absorbed into enterprise culture and the logic of the free market (2016, 10–11). This absorption of culture into neoliberalism is best exemplified by Richard Florida’s influential *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002), for which McRobbie reserves a particularly sharp critique (2016, 45–50).

The advantage of using the *dispositif* as a category of analysis is that it encompasses the coercive state apparatus in the Althusserian sense (Althusser 2014 [1970]), but to that it adds the pervasive influence of corporate culture, private media and private/public education in encouraging people towards particular trajectories. This is evidently more appropriate for the post-Fordist era than an Althusserian analysis that would be geared mostly towards the power of the state. One possible disadvantage of the use of the *dispositif* is that, like Foucault’s related theory of governmentality, the concept of the *dispositif* can risk becoming so broad as to lose some of its critical analytical power.

The growth of creative activities in urban areas is often celebrated as a positive gentrifying force in the inner city. McRobbie urges us to see past the carefully crafted image of the creative neighborhood, to consider the hidden social implications of this shift. Cultural workers’ lives are marked by unprecedented employment insecurity and a lack of welfare support. They regularly move from job to job, from place to place, and start their own businesses (for example, as independent fashion designers, graphic designers, stylists, fashion bloggers, DJs, etc.) The labor experience of these cultural workers is characterized by fast-paced, multiple project work, employment insecurity and stiff competition, long working hours for little or no pay, and no benefits or social security (such as sick leave, penalty rates). McRobbie also notes that this individualized world of entrepreneurial and project work features a distinct lack of critical political engagement and concern for social justice, an absence of collective solidarity among workers, and constant pressure to self-regulate and transform the self into a marketable commodity. She suggests that this is partly because everyone is so exhausted and busy, but also because of the individualizing force and uncritical nature of the creativity *dispositif*.

While a small number creative entrepreneurs have incredible success stories, McRobbie wonders about what happens to everybody else. She notes that risks of burnout, financial stress, anxiety and depression seem anecdotally high, although this is not explored in detail. Drawing on the work of Gina Neff (2012), McRobbie describes how this individualized labor economy has meant that structural inequalities are obscured, so that

cultural workers tend to blame themselves when they run into trouble, or when a project does not succeed. Part of her project seeks to uncover the systemic relations that leave people with no choice but to treat themselves as a form of human capital to be marketed.

Be Creative has great internal consistency in its first three chapters. Although occasionally repetitious, the first half of the book provides a very clear, critical picture of the politics of creative work. McRobbie has the ability to make strange what is so often accepted today as “natural” or inevitable, such as the fact that fashion graduates do not expect to find full-time work and readily accept unpaid internships and the risks of entrepreneurialism, rather than demanding the social supports and work entitlements that were hard fought by unions in former decades. While some of McRobbie’s analysis in relation to Foucault may at times be unnecessarily convoluted, other parts of this text would be appropriate to set for undergraduates in creative fields, perhaps with the hope of developing in these students a more politicized insight of their own personal and professional challenges.

Throughout the book, but most particularly in Chapter 4, McRobbie makes much of how the structural inequity in cultural labor should be understood in feminist terms. In neoliberal economies in the Global North, this form of working life is really only accessible to certain kinds of people—for example, those who have the freedom to move regularly for project work, and who are able to “network” in the late hours of the night. People with disabilities, caring responsibilities and/or migrants face further challenges, with the result that the unsupported and risky world of creative work is often inaccessible to them. McRobbie asks us to consider the consequences of closing out creative practice from this broader group of practitioners, and allowing it to be available only to the relatively privileged (and often childless).

Ultimately McRobbie moves beyond merely stating that this is a social pattern, to the question of what might be done to develop new forms of community, to generate income streams, and to create secure jobs in a manner that does not exclude the vulnerable, or those with caring responsibilities. McRobbie asks:

Can the current discourse of social enterprise be re-reflect away from the individualistic rhetoric of charismatic entrepreneurs ... in favor of a more grounded or grass-roots approach to community building? (2016, 4)

In making small steps towards answering this question, the fifth chapter of *Be Creative* examines a relatively positive case study of the fashion community in Berlin. She notes that Berlin—falling outside of the fashion centers of London, Milan and Paris—has evolved a fashion culture that is more open to local, independent designers, and remains somewhat tied to inclusive social-democratic principles rather than the neoliberal agendas

of the “creative city.” The way this plays out is through “an emphasis on the details of production and process ... [which] makes for a less euphoric designer-subjectivity” (McRobbie 2016, 116). There is a discernible emphasis on building local skills, including boosting the capacities of migrants and single parents. Berlin, McRobbie argues, offers less of a frenzied, cut-throat entrepreneurialism and more of a community-minded atmosphere. While the Berlin fashion scene is not without its complications or difficulties, this chapter suggests that all is not lost for cultural practitioners in Europe.

It what might be considered an unusual move, in Chapter 6 McRobbie selects the entire oeuvre of sociologist Richard Sennett, and asks how Sennett’s understanding of the new work regime can help moderate the frenetic and individualistic nature of the creative economy. This chapter does not fit as neatly into the book’s narrative as the other chapters, but McRobbie attends to this issue with open self-reflexivity. Sennett’s oeuvre offers, she argues, a “consistent and original” argument against the dogma of neoliberalism (McRobbie 2016, 146). She acknowledges the shortcomings of some of Sennett’s arguments, for example the lack of appreciation for feminist issues in the way he handles the “craft” of parenting in *The Craftsman* (2008) (McRobbie 2016, 159). But for McRobbie, the accessibility of Sennett’s writing—and the way he combines labor, craft and urbanism—offer a path through which we might navigate towards an alternative cultural sector, beyond the limited “creativity” mold (McRobbie 2016, 146).

I would not usually make a comment about the cover of an academic book (knowing how little say the author often has in this design process). In the case of *Be Creative*, however, Polity Press have done a disservice to McRobbie and the seriousness of her message. The cover features a photograph of a shop window in Berlin, displaying what looks to be an independent fashion boutique (and what may well be the reflection of McRobbie herself in the window). The image itself is not problematic (and it is specifically connected to the contents of Chapter 5). But on the cover this photograph is paired with only the first half of the book’s title—*Be Creative*—in a clumsy cursive style, *without* the accompanying subtitle, *Making a Living in the New Culture Industries*. Perhaps this styling is self-consciously “daggy,” in resistance to the fashionable hipster aesthetic associated with creativity dogma. But the combined effect of the photograph and the short-form title trivializes this publication and reduces it almost to the appearance of some kind of self-help guidebook. Knowing how deeply ambivalent McRobbie is about the command to “be creative,” one wonders how she feels about the cover of the final publication. To those who do not know McRobbie’s name, the book’s contents are barely hinted at from the appearance of the cover. While this is obviously a minor gripe, I hope it does not mean that students who are unfamiliar with McRobbie will skip past this title without opening it. McRobbie’s call for more critical engagement with creative labor is an urgent and important one, and it paves the way for further studies on the realities of work in the “new economy.”

Notes

1. Notably, this book pre-dates the exit of the Britain from the European Union, so it remains to be seen how this development in global politics will shape labor relations.
2. With that I should disclose my own particular concerns about neoliberal terminology (see Stein 2017).

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