

The Paradox of Creative Work: Exploring Autonomy and Inequality in the Cultural and Creative Industries

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Abstract: This article investigates the notion of the "creative worker" in the context of the cultural and creative industries. It examines the positive aspects of creative employment, such as autonomy, self-expression, and a dynamic workplace. Nevertheless, it highlights the paradoxical nature of creative work, in which employees frequently confront precarious and exploitative conditions. The article discusses the disparities creative workers face, including the prevalence of insecure and project-based contracts, mental health issues, and gender, ethnicity, and class disparities. Using empirical evidence and scholarly debates, this article challenges the notion of a meritocratic creative economy and raises concerns about the systemic barriers marginalised groups encounter. It provides a comprehensive examination of the realities and complexities of working in the creative industries.

Keywords: Creative work, Autonomy, Cultural industries, Creative industries, Employment, Precariousness, Income inequality.

1. Introduction

There is a widespread belief that the current world is a cultural and creative age influenced by the creative economy. The Department of Cultural, Media and Sport in the UK illustrates this fact: creative industries contribute 5% to the economy (DCMS, 2001) and cultural industries employ 1.8 million people, rising by 6% annually (DCMS, 2005). The same pattern could also be seen in America (Americans for the Arts, 2005). As Hesmondhalgh (2007, p.1) points out, the cultural industries 'moved closer to the centre of the economic action'. Therefore, creative industries rapid growth raises questions about what jobs contribute to the growth and what conditions these workers are working under. As a result, the essay will examine what a 'creative worker' is at first and then evaluate a current paradox for creative workers around academic discourses, exploring examples within the scope of the entire cultural industry.

2. Conceptualizing 'Creative Worker'

Florida's conception regards creative people in reference to the creative class that is comprised of human capital connected with creative abilities. There are 2 groups: one is creative core and the other is the creative professionals. The creative core includes:

"... scientists and engineers, university professors, poets and novelists, artists, entertainers, actors, designers and architects, as well as the thought leadership of modern society: nonfiction writers, editors, cultural figures, think-tank researchers, analysts and other opinion makers. Whether they are software programmers or engineers, architects or filmmakers, they fully engage in the creative process..." (Florida, 2002, p.69).

The 'creative core' generates new ideas and designs, which are then translated into new commodities or services by creative professionals- 'they participate in creative problem solving' (Florida, 2002, p69). The author's viewing is located in specialised individuals, including brilliant personalities

from high-level cultural sectors. NESTA (2013) theorizes a term 'creative talent' that give organizations to differentiate their offerings to cater for customers' requirements and tastes. Specifically, 'Mere implementation of a creative choice is not a creative job in this sense, but creating one is' (ibid, p.28). Furthermore, Banks and Hesmondhalgh (2009) further point out that there are still low-paying, low-status, and menial positions associated with artistically directed labour in creative sectors. They investigate the mismatch between input and output done by various sorts of creative workers in working environments where "labour is organised under (at least approximated) 'craft,' 'workshop,' or 'studio' circumstances." The term "creative worker" will be used in this article to admit the gifted image of creative workers with good impacts and then expand to the wild cultural areas to focus on the categories of creative workers who are excluded.

3. Cool Creative Worker

Creative work is frequently considered as a fundamentally progressive activity, which is beneficial not just to capital but also to labour (Banks and Hesmondhalgh, 2009). According to these two writers, creative people realise their own ideas when they operate in a non-alienating creative setting that allows for self-expression. Work compliance and pleasure are also seen among liberals and conservatives (ibid). From the lens above, creative work appears to be good labour with multiple positive impacts for creative employees. They draw on their creative abilities to chase for their autonomy and free choice. They have personal values in the spirit of self-discovery, self-actualization and present an 'open', 'Bohemian' image (Leadbeater and Oakley, 1999; Florida, 2002). Simultaneously, they have drawn on strategies for impression management to make themselves appear to be innovative and independent-minded (Lofgren, 2003; Banks, 2007). It is common for them to wear informal suits, branded dress-code, fashionable haircuts. For instance, creative figures interviewed by Nixon and Crewe in London's advertising sector present their sartorial preferences:

“Steve Goode, a copywriter at Direct Arts, for example, wore an anonymous dark sweatshirt and jeans, with short, styled hair. His creative partner, Mike Walker, loafed in a crumpled, casual olive-green checked shirt and jeans, and was unshaven with longer, less styled hair.” (2004, p.136)

It is clear that self-presentation differentiates themselves from other workers from business sectors.

Creative workplaces and environments have become increasingly comfortable, ‘autonomous’ and ‘unforced’. In offices at small high-tech or design firms, the atmosphere may be downright raucous: large-scale artwork and posters on the walls, broken surfaces exposed with exposed pipes and beams, lounge rooms and play areas (Florida, 2002). Apart from a creative working atmosphere, some companies offer perks such as an in-house massage, video-gaming area, gym membership discounts (Ibid). Here, there is a blurred line between leisure and work, both of which seem to be accepted by numerous workers. They may be enthusiastic to view the workplace akin to a life of passion and happiness as an idealistic element. This means that entrepreneurs seemingly try to establish a ‘clubbable’ internal and out-of-hours work culture by the provision of games, relaxation and gyms (McRobbie, 2002).

Creative workplace and informal dress code have become part of a trend towards the erasure of the barrier between production and play. Creative workers also take some leisure activities such as extreme, physically demanding or unusual sports (Giddens, 1991), thus seeking out ‘active, authentic and participatory’ leisure experiences (Florida, 2002, p.167). By way of illustration, Florida (2002) states that creative workers prefer to climb, run or cycle rather than watching a game on television, emphasizing personal experiences.

Admittedly, it is likely that creative workers are free and autonomous to maximize their creativity in the industry. However, a space between free and work appears under threat (Lewis, 2003). Among creative industries, there is an overt myth that creativity is driven from a passion to ‘Do What You Love’ (ibid). Accordingly, workers exploit themselves causing them captivated with their jobs but enduring emotional and physical constraints. Additionally, the jobs provided by creative industries are casualised with no pay or minimum wage. This is due to the fact that almost small-to-medium enterprises, sole-traders and micro-businesses dominate the creative labours (Creigh-Tye and Thomas, 2001), which provide a short-term contract. Although spontaneous exploitive work might be argued that it belongs to personal choices, it is not deniable that limitations imposed by gendered, social and organizational constraints on choices, identity and perceived duties seem to be glossed over or ignored (Conor, Gill and Taylor, 2015). Therefore, the following part would focus on inequalities within the field of creative industries.

4. The Issues of Being A Creative Worker

The conditions in creative industries still remain depressing inequalities. They confront exploitative and precarious labour conditions (Conor, Gill and Taylor, 2015). In terms of precarity, scholars have shown that creative work is an irregular, project-based and short-term contract. The majority of creative workers are freelancers and they lack a stable income to support themselves, causing them to find second or multiple jobs (Banks, 2007; Gill, 2007). Notably, a majority

of creative jobs are the act of creative making, which plays a vital role in defining their identity. They are likely to be more attuned to mental health, especially for musicians than the general public (Gross and Musgrave, 2017). Therefore, insecurity and precariousness are the norms for people who work in creative industries.

One example of a precarious working condition for freelancers is factual television production. According to the Broadcasting, Entertainment, Cinematograph and Theatre Union (BECTU, 2020), over 3,000 (46%) freelancers have lost money ranging from 2000 to 5000 pounds. Because of the length of the interruption, this would put them in a bind. For example, according to BECTU's study (2020), Jai Nobes is a freelance lighting and video technician, visual artist, and circus performer. He is seeking for alternative occupations to supplement his income because he is unable to pay his debts. This shows that the career prospects of creative professionals are uncertain: earnings are low and unequally distributed, leave alone insurance, healthcare, and pension benefits.

There is the same pattern for musicians alongside freelancer professionals working concerning financial precarious. Moreover, musicians seem to be more vulnerable to the sick. There appears to be a direct link between the prevalence of mental illness among artists and the working conditions in the music business (Gross and Musgrave, 2017). According to these two authors, it is creativity—the expression of one's identity—that makes musicians vulnerable and suffering.

The other issue in relation to gender is more complex. Gender segregation is striking in creative industries (Conor, Gill and Taylor, 2015). Figure 1 illustrates this point clearly: the gender gap between females and males is drastic with only 37.2% women in the creative economy (DCMS, 2016). It is clear that there are 78.6% of male's dominant in IT, software and computer services. The largest number of jobs for females in creative industries is in music, visual and performing arts.

	Male	Female	% Female
Advertising and marketing	109,000	73,000	40.3%
Architecture	59,000	31,000	34.3%
Design: product, graphic and fashion design	76,000	56,000	42.3%
Film, TV, video, radio and photography	139,000	92,000	39.9%
IT, software and computer services	503,000	137,000	21.4%
Museums, galleries and libraries	33,000	64,000	65.9%
Music, performing and visual arts	149,000	138,000	48.1%
Publishing	102,000	98,000	49.0%
Creative Economy Total	1,145,000	694,000	37.2%

Figure 1. Employment in the creative industries by females and males in 2015

Obtain:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/534305/Focus_on_Employment_revised_040716.pdf

Gender occupational segregation is also evident in the creative industries. Females are underrepresented in creative roles in the film industry, such as screenwriter, camera operator, and director, while they are overrepresented in clothing and cosmetics (Gill, 2002).

Although the field of film industry presents a good women's representation, discrepancies are still emerged in the most senior roles (Gill, 2002). The career barrier subtly prevents women from gaining chances to reach a high-title job. This barrier is the “glass ceiling”- keeping women from achieving the top in creative industries (Gill, 2014; Scharff, 2015). For example, there has never had a female Director-General in BBC.

Gender issues are not the only reason in relation to inequalities for creative workers. They also experience exclusion regarding race and ethnicity (Thanki and Jeffreys, 2007). The under-representation of BAME (Black, Asian, and minority ethnic) has led to claims of “institutional racism” (ibid). As figure 2 shows, the white creative workers dominate in the creative economy but fewer than one in ten of the creative workforces is minority ethnic groups (DCMS, 2016).

Ethnicity	Jobs	Proportion
White	2,578,000	89.0%
Asian / Asian British	182,000	6.3%
Black / African / Caribbean / Black British	54,000	1.9%
Mixed	32,000	1.1%
Other	47,000	1.6%
Total Creative Economy	2,895,000	100%

Figure 2. Employment in the Creative Economy by Ethnicity in 2015

Obtain:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/534305/Focus_on_Employment_revised_040716.pdf

Lenny Henry, a black comedian and actor, delivered a speech in 2014 would succinctly summarize this depressing picture in the British television industry:

“People aren’t just hitting the glass ceiling; they are standing on a glass precipice.” (quoted in Khaleeli, 2014)

The bleak condition of inequalities is a grim reality that confounds the picture of meritocratic. The narrative of meritocratic culture and creativity is the core of Florida (2002) *The Rise of the Creative Class*, a publication that sets the tone for public and critical discussions. In his discussions, it is useful for increasing the city’s capacity to attract a generation of young, highly educated with creativity, technical expertise. More specifically, it facilitates an environment that echoes what Florida defines as the characteristics of creative workers; they have ‘diverse origins, ‘social connectivity, cultural eclecticism and meritocratic ethos’ (Miles, 2016). Nevertheless, O’ Brien (2017) critiques this narrative since only privileged people could be access to the creative class. As Andrew Walters (quoted in Andrew Hough, 2012) asserts, acting seems to become the realm of “posh” people as working-class people would be unable to afford to pursue it as a vocation. Therefore, the meritocratic narrative blinds systemic disparities related to class, gender and other discriminations (Littler, 2013).

To sum up, this essay has explored the positive and negative aspects of creative workers. First, it discusses the definition of the ‘creative worker’ surrounding Florida and Nesta, which is high-valued creative talents create differentiated products. Then, it is further reconsidered for excluded creative workers in creative industries.

Secondly, there are some discussions around scholars’ debates with specific examples to illustrate positive aspects for creative workers. They work in an enthusiastic environment to facilitate artistic and creative freedom. They have an informal dress code and take leisure activities to improve themselves. However, creative workers seem to exploit themselves. They are under the myth of the sweet assertion about creativity.

Indeed, the shreds of evidence drawing on scholars’ debates and specific examples show that working in the creative industries is unstable. They do not have a long-term contract and even have a mental illness. Additionally, creative industries are inequalities in relation to gender, race and ethnicity and class. Finally, the gaps question meritocratic

myth in prospects of creative workers.

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