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Precarity and Autonomy in Cultural and Craft Industries

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REVIEW ESSAY / NOTE CRITIQUE

Refining Creative Labour: Precarity and Autonomy in Cultural and Craft Industries

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Susan Luckman, *Craft and the Creative Economy* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015)

George Morgan and Pariece Nelligan, *The Creativity Hoax: Precarious Work in the Gig Economy* (London and New York: Anthem Press, 2018)

It might seem a relatively simple task to go about defining "creative labour." The term itself invokes images of the artist, writer, designer, or musician. However, to conceive of the creative worker as one whose work centres on artistic or aesthetic creativity leaves one the complicated task of delineating between the truly creative and the uncreative. Is a software developer a creative worker? A pastry chef? A topiary gardener?

Indeed, if we consider the problem in Marxian terms, human labour is creative by its very nature.[1] To transform their environment and meet a human need, the worker plans and executes a series of actions in order to create an object of use. It is under the relations of a capitalist economy that a given task is stripped of its creative content. The worker producing under the guidance of the capitalist and his managerial proxies is stripped of creative agency and reduced to a provider of manual, kinetic energy, the tasks of planning and conceptualization reserved for her betters. The distance between the worker and mental labour was dramatically increased with the advent of "scientific management," the planning oversight of professional management expanding to encompass most conceptual tasks.[2]

1. Karl Marx, *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, ed. and trans. Loyd D. Easton and Kurt H. Guddat (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997).

2. Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1974).

Benjamin Anderson, "Refining Creative Labour: Precarity and Autonomy in Cultural and Craft Industries," *Labour/Le Travail* 84 (Fall 2019):325–331, https://doi.org/10.1353/llt.2019.0042.

Of course, the mental/manual division of labour that characterized the Fordist period is not necessarily as uniformly applicable today. In fact, over the past three decades, myriad new theories and models have been proposed to explain the increasing importance of cognitive, immaterial, affective, and otherwise non-physical aspects of work, especially in the knowledge and service economies of the Global North. Some suggest that creativity, far from being the sole purview of the managerial classes, is a required quality and qualification for workers trying to navigate today's gig economy.[3]

Unfortunately, much of the recent scholarship on creative labour treats the concept in one of two arenas. The first approach tends to conceive of creative labour as labour that produces cultural or informational goods in the cultural industries.[4] The other sees creativity as an affective imperative of post-Fordist managerialism.[5] Fortunately, for those of us interested in both the political economy and working subjectivities of creative workers, there seems to be an emerging field of scholarship intent on interrogating the interrelations of the material and ideological elements of creative labour. This approach recognizes the production of cultural and informational commodities as well as artisanal, craft, and bespoke commodities as inhabiting a similar yet tense domain in the 21st-century economy.

Although the books reviewed here tend to look specifically at either physical craft labour (Luckman) or cultural creative labour (Morgan and Nelligan), read together they demonstrate how the two are joined not only by the central ingredients of skill and creativity but often by a craft ethic that motivates both the filmmaker and the jeweller. This craft mentality – understood as the pursuit of both quality and skill development – plays a central role in George Morgan and Pariece Nelligan's interviews with precarious cultural workers as well as in Susan Luckman's analysis of the working lives of craftspeople, specifically self-employed women in the Global North. One will also recognize the importance of technology in the development and circulation of this ethic and in the labour contexts of each group of workers. Furthermore, each book, while examining different class-based contexts – the middle-class craftsperson seeking supplemental income versus the precarious, often working-class, aspiring cultural creative – highlights the ways in which normalized insecurity and socially mediated self-commodification blur some of the distinctions between the working lives of creative workers and those of others working outside of traditional Fordist arrangements. Looking at these characteristics in tandem should give us a better sense of how we might refine our conceptualization of creative labour. In order to do this, let's begin by considering the content of both books in turn. Following this exploration, we will consider

3. Oli Mould, *Against Creativity* (London: Verso, 2018).

4. David Hesmondhalgh, *The Cultural Industries* (London: SAGE, 2007).

5. Arlie Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

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how each sheds light on the subjective commonalities of craft and cultural work and how these commonalities might propel us into a more nuanced understanding of the role of creativity in the 21st-century labour context.

In their recent examination of the interaction between precarious work and cultural narratives of creativity in northern economies, Morgan and Nelligan profile a number of precariously employed cultural workers, paying particular attention to their motivations for pursuing creative careers and how these were catalyzed by and stand in tension against their educations and working-class backgrounds. *The Creativity Hoax: Precarious Work in the Gig Economy* begins with an account of the rise of creativity as a cultural imperative wherein workers are socialized to pursue their dreams whatever the cost while simultaneously internalizing any failures along the way as personal deficiencies rather than structural obstacles or limits. Central to this account sits the division of mental and manual labour, the maturation of which the authors place at the feet of the Taylorization of the labour process in the first half of the 20th century. However, for Morgan and Nelligan, the separation of planning from fabrication is only the first step in the creation of what they call "a lifestyle zeitgeist" in the form of a hegemonic mythology of creative capital (15). In their reading of the cultural shifts since 1968, Morgan and Nelligan argue that the workplace imperative of creativity can be seen as a response to countercultural demands for more autonomous and dignifying forms of work, but one that simultaneously masks the generalized austerity and precarity arising against the neoliberal backdrop. Creativity, in this sense, shifts from its function as "a word that once signified independent self-expression ... [to] become both a motto of neo-liberalism and a panacea for its consequences" (15). Put differently, creativity stands out as an imperative for taking advantage of the purported freedom of the network society at the same time that it downloads responsibility for increasing precarity onto workers themselves.

Morgan and Nelligan proceed in demonstrating this ideological phenomenon by introducing their readers to a cast of precariously employed cultural workers. Participants in their study tend to be young, aspiring creatives who have pursued their passions but have mostly found precarity rather than success. Many find themselves in a position where they have to dance around their identities as creatives while they work jobs in the service sector to get by. Here one is reminded of the proverbial aspiring actor who spends the bulk of their waking hours waiting tables. The creative identity, according to the authors, reinforces an attitude toward uncreative waged work that paints it as a temporally limited tributary rather than the logical result of a lack of class-based privilege and deck stacking. In their words, "those who see their jobs as temporary are less likely to make industrial demands for better wages, conditions and job security" (80–81). At the same time, these workers are conditioned to a gigged work rhythm wherein their creative aspirations make the flexibility, insecurity, and limited-term nature of their side jobs not only untroubling but desirable. As creative freelancers, the aspiration takes priority

over the side job, creating a willingness to accept precarious conditions in the hope of the next creative gig.

This tendency stands out when considered against the amount of "hope labour" that builds the foundation of creative aspiration.[6] It is no big stretch to suggest that creative work in the contemporary economy depends upon a certain amount of self-branding, skill development, and networking. What is particularly interesting in this regard is the tendency of some of Morgan and Nelligan's participants to treat themselves as the creative equivalents of zero-hour workers. In recounting one participant's organization of her work portfolio, the authors go as far as to label her a kind of "just-in-time worker" (101). They read this worker as the quintessential gig worker as they describe her flexibility, development of multitudinous skills, and willingness to continually pitch new projects. Interesting in this read, however, is the authors' identification of the gendered nature of this particular working subjectivity. In relaying the attitudes and struggles of male participants, Morgan and Nelligan generalize their experience to one building from a more or less traditional working-class masculinity, one that acts as a kind of "cultural baggage" in the gig economy (103). The male worker, in this sense, expects a certain level of stability, security, and fixedness, often failing to adapt to the footloose nature of creative contract work. By contrast, the authors argue that many of the women they spoke with were more willing and able to reflexively respond to the demands of the portfolio economy, exercising versatility and fluidity in navigating their competing responsibilities and goals. As the authors clearly note, this is not meant to suggest that women do not face a slough of obstacles in the precarious world of creative work, but that even as they manoeuvre around these, they are not necessarily as encumbered by the rigidity and fixedness of modern masculine attitudes toward formal employment.

This gendered difference in adapting to the gigged nature of creative work serves as a reasonable transition into Luckman's interrogation of home-based craft production in the Global North. In *Craft and the Creative Economy*, Luckman explores the recent growth in small-scale craft practice, especially by middle-class women in places like Australia, western Europe, and North America. Building upon a previous article by the author on the role of the online crafts marketplace Etsy in shoring up the recent boom in artisanal production, *Craft and the Creative Economy* tracks the history of the various crafts movements since the Victorian period, demonstrating that the current renewal of interest in craft production is fuelled by rejections of directly alienating forms of work and the assertion of vocational identities and creative autonomy on the part of those artisans who pursue craft as either full-time occupation or supplementary income.[7] At the same time, Luckman is cautious

6. Kathleen Kuehn & Thomas F. Corrigan, "Hope Labor: The Role of Employment Prospects in Online Social Production," *Political Economy of Communication* 1, 1 (2013): 9–25.

7. Susan Luckman, "The Aura of the Analogue in a Digital Age: Women's Crafts, Creative

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not to overemphasize the potentially resistant motivations behind the adoption of self-directed home enterprise, acknowledging that in the Global North such activities are taken on largely by those with the social privilege and security networks to pursue what some might consider leisurely forms of work. As Luckman critically examines maker profiles on Etsy, it becomes readily apparent that the social and working conditions of these self-employed creatives toe a line between precarious self-exploitation and leisure, in which Etsy sellers are simply monetizing their craft hobbies while at the same time balancing their reproductive labour as parents. In this way, Luckman reveals the dual nature of home-based craft labour. On the one hand, self-directed, home-based enterprise presents these workers with the opportunity to plan their own schedules, often around their families, while simultaneously building social capital and distinction through their creative production. On the other, this creeping commodification of home-based and reproductive work also functions to enclose the rhythms and routines not only of craft practice but of the home more generally.

Two particular aspects of this formation stand out as crucial ingredients in the refinement of conceptualizations of creative labour. First, Luckman clearly categorizes craft production as a part of the cultural industries, alongside those forms of immaterial labour highlighted by Morgan and Nelligan. Acknowledging the central importance of creativity in the generation of profits in the post-Fordist economy, Luckman attempts to zero in on the essential role of creativity in craft production, challenging her readers to move past considerations of cultural industries that trade only in immaterial commodities. Instead, one should acknowledge the creative work that goes into the design and fabrication of material cultural goods, especially the kinds of crafts that are regularly traded in marketplaces like Etsy. Second, Luckman argues quite convincingly that the trivialization of craft practice in the contemporary economy sits on a foundation of the devaluation of reproductive and home-based work. The reader is reminded that women's reproductive labour has historically been excluded from the formal marketplace. Luckman further explains that the informality of women's work is reinforced through its systematic invisibilization, arguing that "the very fact that it [domestic labour] is often home working … means that records of production have historically rarely been kept, further contributing to female craft production's erasure from economic history and devaluing as 'serious work'" (49). This legacy of informality, in Luckman's reading, carries forward to today, informing the balancing act for women producers between amateur labours of love and serious interventions into the craft marketplace. In this way, the self-employed makers who populate Etsy inhabit a different but adjacent place within the creative labour ecosystem. Whereas the cultural workers interviewed by Morgan and Nelligan find themselves in a constant race for gigs, these home-based

Markets and Home-Based Labour after Etsy," *Cultural Studies Review* 19, 1 (2013): 249–270.

producers must navigate a certain informal formality in selling their wares. Although they commonly enjoy a degree of middle-class security, the competing priorities of home and market resemble the "actually existing versus potential work" negotiation demanded of the precariously employed creative workers of the other book.

Where the two books converge is in the potential they both see in creative labour, in terms of envisioning alternatives to the contemporary economy. For their part, Morgan and Nelligan temper their hope for this potential by acknowledging capitalism's ability to react to and co-opt critique, drawing upon Boltanski and Chiapello's examination of the capitalist facelift following the social upheavals of the 1960s.[8] Fortunately, in Morgan and Nelligan's view, so-called "feral enterprise" – that is, "entrepreneurial activities that bear little resemblance … and in some cases stand in opposition to … modern capitalism" – captures the creative energies of post-Fordism and could, under the right circumstances, redirect them toward the creation of alternative economic formations (118). In this way, Morgan and Nelligan's project culminates in a meditation on the traditional autonomist Marxist projection of the revolutionary potential of immaterial labour.[9] What is relatively novel in their account is their conceptualization of "feral enterprise" as a catalyzing mythology that interpellates creative workers as resistant subjects while simultaneously conditioning them to consider their work as inherently resistant, thereby potentially defusing the critical potential of their footloose positions. The trap in this mythology, according to the authors, is the ethical reprieve it gives to creative workers, which actually functions to reinforce their willing self-exploitation.

Conversely, Luckman culminates her project with a relatively more optimistic account of the potentials embedded within such a subjective position. Recognizing the dangers of neoliberal co-optation of resistant impulses, Luckman refocuses on the potentials of craft practice, especially as these may democratize production and light the way for alternative economic formations. Luckman locates the democratizing potential of craft practice not in the ways it decentralizes production from the manufacturing centre to dispersed individual producers or normalizes the consumption of handmade goods, but in the changes in organizational and labour practices it presents at the point of production as well as in its ability to mobilize communities around common interests and material experience. Craft, if we build upon this position, holds the potential to be a site for the building of class consciousness, but one mediated more by collaborative process than by the lived immiseration of the Fordist factory. We should remember, of course, that Luckman's project is one that explores craft as a middle-class and Western activity. As such, we

8. Luc Boltanski & Eve Chiapello, eds., *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2007).

9. Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000).

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should question the extent to which its collaborative characteristics are generalizable in the wider global economy, especially as home-based production remains one of the few income-generating options for many women in the Global South.

Read in tandem, however, these two books provide a timely refinement to conceptualizations of creative labour and its complicated position in the global economy. First, Luckman gives us a compelling account of the creative characteristics of craft labour and convincingly argues for its inclusion in discussions of creative labour and cultural industries. Interestingly, when her book is read alongside Morgan and Nelligan's analysis of the classed aspects of immaterial labour, craft labour appears to be a logical bridge between the small-scale, localized production of pre-industrial capitalism and the symbolically rich world of production in the post-Fordist economy. Second, the reading of these two books together highlights the challenge of precarity and the false promise of entrepreneurial activity encouraged by the rhetoric of creativity. The workers highlighted in each study find themselves, voluntarily or not, in a constant tug-of-war between pragmatic considerations like paying the rent and more ideal ones like pursuing their passions. In the end, a reader might question whether either account points to any true hope of a working-class reorganization of our social reality. They might question whether considering the nuances of self-employment and autonomy in the face of institutionalized precarity, insecurity, and exploitation really provides us with a road map to revolution. I must admit that, in the final analysis, I am one of these. This is not to suggest that understanding the subjective experiences of creative work is not worthwhile. Instead, it seems to me that the goal now, especially as we understand such positions, is to build capacities for working-class and precarious organizing. How should we, as we face the atomization of productive work under new forms of neoliberal capitalism and the entrepreneurialization of many traditional productive roles, envision and organize solidarity and collective action?