On the Entrepreneurial Principles of the Cultural and Creative Industries

Actual insights into
Cultural and Creative
Entrepreneurship
Research

Giep Hagoort
Aukje Thomassen
Rene Kooyman (Ed)

Key Elements
Concepts & Perspectives
Urban Development
Innovation
Education

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Be Creative Under-Class!

Myths, Paradoxes and Strategies in the Talent Economy

Maria Ptqk

Abstract

During the last few years, the apparently paradoxical expression *'creative economy'* has emerged with astonishing success. Creative work has achieved recognition in the new labor theory. Artists are identified as individuals or small groups, specialized in intense immaterial production, whose professional practice is associated with high degrees of subjectivity, informality and autonomy.
The promotion of creativity is usually identified with personal fulfillment, freedom and empowerment, and thus perceived as an improvement in the working conditions. In reality Creative Workers operate in niche economies, with high levels of precariousness and self-management, self-regulated or non-regulated labor conditions, no precise professional categories, and many concessions to the invisible economy. They combine occasional contracts with periods of inactivity and experiences of self-employment. Their actual survival depends to a large extent on informal collaboration networks - both personal and professional. Often facilitated by family-based support - and on the many ramifications of the Welfare State, such as grants, public funding or social benefits. Overall, their situation is hardly sustainable in the long term.

Introduction

During the last few years, the apparently paradoxical expression *'creative economy'* has emerged with astonishing success. It has burst into public policies, corporate agendas, higher education curricula, economic magazines and cultural events that unanimously celebrate it as the winning paradigm that will lead us out of the current crisis and into a new era of economical and social progress.

These transformations are real and profound. Yet, along with them, a parallel process has taken place, one of a narrative nature, aimed at identifying and explaining such changes in a clear and seductive manner. In order to be effective, the creative economy had to find a name - and is still at it: *talent economy, knowledge economy, cultural, semiotic* or *informational capitalism*, the terminology is wide and inviting – and produces charming and empowering stories itself. Such stories tell us about causes, cycles, opportunities and protagonists, they contribute to a feeling of cohesion around a shared and common project and provide us with a reliable road-map that can help us deal with uncertainty. Creativity and the emerging concept of creative work, in all their multiple variations, are both part of this storytelling.

One pioneer in this process was Tony Blair's New Labour Government, who coined the term 'creative industries' as part of a double maneuver of economizing culture and culturizing economy. The Cool Britannia artifact deployed two co-ordinated actions. On the one hand, it redefined what had hitherto been known as the cultural and service industries: film, TV, radio, publishing, music, art, performing arts, antiques, crafts, computer games, architecture, fashion, software development, IT services and design [1] On the other hand, it implemented *'a strong public campaign to persuade the world that the country that Napoleon once depicted as a nation of shopkeepers had become a country of artists and designers* (Ross, 2007).

[1] Sectors included in the list of creative industries in the U.K.: Department of Culture, Media and Sport, Creative Industry Task Force: Mapping Document (London 1998).

More than a decade after the boom of the creative industries, we now witness the staging of a second narrative move. The aim is no longer only to promote the development of some economic fields, but to analyze the essence of creative work in order to qualify it as the professional model of the new economy. In current management literature, the message is simple: to achieve the paradigm shift, we need to understand and theorize this new form of intangible production, and to promote it in the frame of a wide culture of creativity that can impregnate all levels of economic activity and become socially internalized as the new culture of labor. What Ulrich Beck once called *'the brave new world of work'* (Beck, 2000).

When talent makes capital dance[2]

Creative work has achieved recognition in the new labor theory though two referential subjects: artists and hackers. Artists -together with their *ersatz*: cultural workers- are identified as individuals or small groups specialized in intense immaterial production, whose professional practice is associated with high degrees of subjectivity, informality and autonomy (McRobbie, 2004). Hackers - and free software programmers - embody the evidence that it is possible to be highly competitive by challenging the rules of traditional industrial production and that the lack of schedules, ties and verticality do not hinder efficiency, but foster it (Himanen, 2000).

The assimilation between artists and software programmers had a key role in the early genesis of the creative industries. Despite its heterogeneity, the field clearly combines two types of activity that were previously considered as different: the old and highly theorized *'cultural industries'* and the recent and promising business born from the cutting-edge technological revolution. Both are based on high doses of applied knowledge, provide a genuinely non-commercial added value that is, still, not so easy to outsource[3] and operate within the logics of agglomeration economies, radically different from the traditional economies of industrial mass production.

These fields are usually inhabited by small organizations or freelancers, working with porous boundaries and a variable geometry in which networks and information are openly exchanged. The economy of agglomeration, usually identified with arts and culture, is also the major organizational model in environments of high technological innovation such as Silicon Valley (Landa, 2008). It seems today that contemporary corporations, if they want to embrace the current economic changes, should become something like a permanent laboratory, halfway between a start-up, a hacklab, and an artist's studio, which appear to be the ideal working environments to transform knowledge and creative skills into commodities.

As a consequence, creative workers (in the broadest sense: artists, architects, software designers, etc.) are increasingly demanded for innovation agendas and tasks related to informational and knowledge-based paradigms (participatory processes, citizen media, networks, peer-to-peer organizations, etc.). The project Disonancias is an example of such interactions:

[2] The title of this section is a reference to Kjell A. Nordstrom and Jonas Ridderstråle, *Funky Business. Talent Makes Capital Dance* (London, 1999: Pearson Education), presented by the authors themselves as *'a manifesto for the new world of business'*.

[3] Programming tasks are being outsourced to Asian countries such as India and South Korea, but this doesn't substantially change the economic organization of the IT industry. Intellectual property rights and profits are still mainly controlled by Western countries corporations.

'Disonancias is a platform aimed at companies, research centers or public entities interested in collaborating with artists in order to promote their innovation. It is based on the premise that artists are researchers by definition. Within the framework of collaborating with organizations, they are able to propose new and different innovation paths, introducing detours and dissonance into the usual processes of thought and action, providing creativity and work methodologies and serving as a catalyst for team members. The Disonancias platform views innovation not as an end in itself, but as a tool to change ways of acting, attitudes and values, beyond that of economic benefit. In the long term, Disonancias aims to transmit to society the importance of developing creative environments and extending innovation culture in all its aspects, as well as promoting social responsibility in organizations and a commitment of artists with society' (Disonancias, 2012).

The promotion of creativity

The promotion of creativity is usually identified with personal fulfillment, freedom and empowerment, and thus perceived as an improvement in the working conditions. According to Rosalind Gill (2007), when asked about the nature of their work, freelancers and employees in new media (an emerging professional sector demanding a high degree of creative and technological skills), mention the following key elements: pleasure and fun; autonomy, entrepreneurship and lack of hierarchies; innovation and permanent learning; informal communication and exchange; the possibility to take part in projects with a social impact; the perception that these working environments are egalitarian and open to diversity; and the fascination with the novelty of the sector. Zoe Romano (2009) points out one more element: prestige and peer recognition. Both researchers emphasize the fact that creative workers are deeply convinced that what they do is beneficial to society as a whole, and that they all experience their profession as an adequate space for social action. They also both agree that, among their motivations, money and security are secondary. As one of Gill's interviewees says: *'If I wanted to have a stable job and earn money, I'd do something else'*.

One key element that is not explicitly mentioned but is embedded in their answers is that, for creative workers, the limits of the time/space of life and the time/space of work are diluted. They have transformed their hobbies into a profession, and account it as an advantage and a victory against conventional work and all it represents in terms of alienation and servitude: 'It's as if you were getting paid for your hobby' (Gill, 2007). Turning subjectivity into a productive resource, or, to put it more poetically, becoming 'an artist of one's own life': this is the successful slogan of the contemporary discourse on work which the creative workers embody, that radically sets them apart from other kinds of workers. As Marion Von Osten (2007) puts it:

'From the perspective of groups orientated around long-term employment like civil or labor parties, it becomes difficult to determine how, why and when to differentiate between 'work' and 'non-work'. The artist seems to be a key figure in comprehending this situation, operating as a touchstone for mediating this new understanding of living and working to a broader audience'.

Because when one works for his or her own personal fulfillment - when work merges with one's own subjectivity and personal life - one is willing to do it *anyway*.

The rise of the creative under-class

Ten years ago, at the beginning of the 21st century, Richard Florida announced that a new urban high-skilled professional class was born. Whatever approach one might have towards his theories, one point seems to be beyond discussion. Neither Florida's celebratory discourse nor the policies inspired have turned into a real analysis of what creative work actually is and how it operates, but have rather assumed some standardized ideas on what it should be - or more precisely: how it should *be told* - in order to meet the needs of the public and corporate agendas. As a result, the creative workers – the men and women that do work in the creative field - have been, firstly instrumentalized as a reference model, and then left out of the picture.

> *'New media employees helped to glamorize the 24/7 workweek, design, art, architecture, and custom craft were embraced as engines for boosting property values in the real estate boom, the amateur (MyCreativity) ethic became the basis for a whole new discount mode of production that exploited the cult of attention as a cheap labor supply'.*[4]

Creative workers operate in niche economies, with high levels of precariousness and self-management, self-regulated or non-regulated labor conditions, no precise professional categories, and many concessions to the invisible economy. They combine occasional contracts with periods of inactivity and experiences of self-employment. Their actual survival depends, to a large extent, on informal collaboration networks - both personal and professional, as well as family-based - and on the many ramifications of the Welfare State, such as grants, public funding or social benefits. Overall, their situation is hardly sustainable in the long term.

What transpires from the interviews realized by Gill is that the salaries in the new media (in United Kingdom and The Netherlands) are much lower than in other sectors. More than a third earn less than 20.000 € /year, half of whom less than 10.000 € / year, while only another third has an income above the national average, which is of 30.000 € / year. In contrast, 9 out of every 10 permanent employees earn over 30.000 € a year. And, while the latter work an average of 35 and 40 hours a week, new media professionals work between 55 and 80 hours a week. Job insecurity is joined here by the lack of a regular flow of work (periods of high intensity alternate with others in which projects are in short supply), the pressure of permanent training and a compulsive sociability with professional aims (in 99% of the cases, projects arise from a personal relationship). Many of the people interviewed also recognize that, for them, maternity is a very difficult option (Gill, 2009).

From the standpoint of the new management theories, these conditions of informality are praised to excess. The basic premise is that in order to survive in an increasingly competitive environment, the contemporary worker *must be free*, and that insecurity and instability are inevitable structural conditions of cognitive capitalism.

> *'Maybe the logic of dependence at work has been part of the arsenal deployed by the contracting party to dominate the contracted party. The asymmetry of the relationship burrowed into the wound: an employed, subcontracted, paid worker, dominated by a hierarchical superior. A whole language of dependencies. But this doesn't make sense anymore'* (Ormaetxea 2008).

[4] Andrew Ross interviewed by Geert Lovink in *My Creativity Reader. A Critique of Creative Industries*, edited by Geert Lovink and Ned Rossiter (Amsterdam 2007: Institute of Network Cultures).

According to this logic, the worker should become a nomadic and flexible labor resource, with no stable connections to any company, in a dynamic of competition/collaboration with his or her peers. That is, to become a conglomerate of skills and knowledge in a permanent state of adaptation, which can be deployed at any moment, depending on market needs. The figure that best embodies this professional attitude is that of the entrepreneur, identified with the talent economy success model. Beyond the triumph of creativity or the impact of cognitive skills as a driving force of development, the true virtue of creative work is that, by idealizing freedom, it contributes to hide the labor de-regulation, the lack of stable work and the economic instability. The consequence is that the latter lose their conflictive dimension and can be unproblematically transferred to the public opinion as an attractive, successful and desirable lifestyle choice. The cognitive worker is seen as a role-model for any worker, whose aim is to become *an ever-flexible provider of immaterial services, available on demand*. That is the dark side of the myth of entrepreneurship, promoted by innovation consultants, public policy makers, and other Floridian enthusiasts, who often elaborate their theories under the protection of big companies, universities, public administrations or personal situations which allow them to jump safely into the adventure of creativity.

Conclusion

Creative workers are trapped in a paradoxical situation that often borders on schizophrenia. Their position is, at the same time, strategic and subsidiary. They possess the most appreciated skills in the labor market, but their conditions of work are miserable. When they provide their services for policies leading to the promotion of creativity and the transformation of the current economic model, they often don't appreciate the context, or the use that is made of their contribution. Facing their own contradictions, they oscillate between, on the one hand, the fascinating figure of the cognitive elite *à la* Florida, and, on the other hand, the stereotype of the net-slave or the techno-cultural precariat suggested by Gill. Both referents appear close to them, but none captures the complexity and ambivalence of their position. Moreover, from the point of view of classic socio-economic theory, these are opposed figures. How can one be part of an elite and proletarian at the same time? And, above all, how can a mass of freelance and disorganized workers, who perceive themselves as independent, articulate an efficient language of collective professional claims?

> *'Knowledge and cultural workers are accustomed to think of themselves as in the vanguard, and it will probably take a generation of 'proletarianization' and another big recession to persuade them that collective organizing is in their long-term interest.'*[5]

On a daily basis, creative workers like to think of themselves as resistance agents. They know that the decisions that affect them are taken at political and corporate levels, at which they never participate. But they tend to protect themselves with short- and mid-term tactics. They avoid collaborating in projects whose aims they don't share or tell themselves that this is just for immediate economic necessity. They resort to their full informal repertoire of survival techniques in order to keep on *doing what they like*. The problem is that the niche economy, the logics of the subsidy, the personal networks and the daytime job that sustains the creative one are not sustainable in the long-term. And they will become less sustainable as the immaterial productive model continues to develop. It is

[5] Andrew Ross interviewed by Geert Lovink in *My Creativity Reader. A Critique of Creative Industries*.

then urgent to implement parallel counter-narratives that question profoundly the current public discourse around the talent economy and explain it from the inside, with its highlights and its shadows. And, using that same creativity, imagine new possibilities of political action that can transform the key position of creative workers into a professional, collective and sustainable strategy.

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About the author

Maria Ptqk (ES) is a freelance curator, consultant and researcher working at the confluence of cultural policies, new media, and gender studies. Member of GenderArtNet, and moderator/initiator of the Blog: *http://ptqkblogzine.blogspot.com*
mariaptqk@gmail.com

Giep Hagoort (NL) is cultural entrepreneur, professor art and economics at the Utrecht University and the Utrecht School of the Arts, and dean of the Amsterdam School of Management. He is author of a collection of books on management, innovation, entrepreneurship and the cultural and creative industries. Giep Hagoort has been visiting lecturer at various universities and academies.
giep.hagoort@central.hku.nl

Aukje Thomassen (NZ) is Associate Professor and Head of Research at the School of Art & Design, Faculty of Design & Creative Technologies at the Auckland University of Technology AUT. Her research activities are geographically split between NZ and Europe. In NZ she is a member of various committees and boards, such as representing AUT University in the NZ EU centres network of the seven leading universities in NZ.
aukje.thomassen@aut.ac.nz

Rene Kooyman (NL) graduated with a major in Urban and Regional Planning. He received a Diplôme Educations Approfondies (DEA) from the University of Geneva and a Master in Urban Area Development (MUAD). Recently Rene Kooyman has been Managing Editor for the EU EACEA Research Project on the Entrepreneurial dimensions of cultural and creative industries.
rkooyman@rkooyman.com

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