

Creative Labor

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This essay compares two influential conceptions of contemporary labor, which emerge from and contribute to radically divergent interpretive traditions, but share common ground. First is the largely celebratory idea of a "creative class" branded by Richard Florida, management professor and globe-trotting consultant to government and industry. Second is the account of "immaterial labor" assembled by a group of thinkers tied to *autonomia*, a radical Marxist formation with origins in the Italian workerist movement. This group, now in a "post-workerist" mode, includes Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, Maurizio Lazzarato, and Paolo Virno. I will refer to them as autonomists, a poor but convenient shorthand. Florida's research has influenced recent government policy and management literature in which individuals appear as born innovators, the origins of enterprise, naturally predisposed to be against what exists and to try to perfect it through invention; and in which the economy discovers this pre-existing tendency and then nurtures it into an engine for ceaseless renewal. The autonomists' theories, which imagine a resistant subjectivity that is at once subsumed within, outside of, and the source of liberation from capitalism, are hardly equivalent to Florida's. Nevertheless, I suggest they are likewise more symptoms than diagnoses of the pervasive vocabulary that fathoms creative expression as an essence of experimentation emanating from an internal and natural source, and that finds one of its models in idealized apprehension of artists' ostensible resistance to routine, to management, to standardization, and to commodification. For Florida, the fact that this vocabulary is one that contemporary capitalism clearly requires and reinforces is not a problem: his creative subject is the fruit of the progress of modernization, of the spread of self-reflexivity and freedom. The autonomists' case is more difficult. They

themselves tend to lament that the expressive self-realization at the core of their theory is the same one nurtured and expropriated by capital, yet they do not offer any alternative to this conception of human motivation and behavior. Instead, their immaterial producer, her character assumed rather than interpreted, appears largely destitute of any significant history.¹

To begin, Florida and the autonomists broadly agree that over the past few decades more work has become comparable to artists' work. For Florida this is a positive development. For the autonomists it is ambivalent, but they state with little equivocation that the kind of aesthetic expression subsumed within capitalist production is not real creativity, but rather its codified and corrupted appearance in commodity form. Still, both camps imagine creativity as located within individuals' uncontainable experimental energies and self-expressive capacities. In Florida's work, these capacities are often facilitated and liberated by development of one's career within an expanding marketplace for creative work. For the autonomists, they are instead threatened by such incorporation. In fact, they are quashed by the sheer process of individuation, since that, too, has by now been subsumed into capitalist relations, until only a "monad" of pure "potential," existing somehow before socialization, can be the source of real creativity. Nevertheless, this "potential," imagined as an inherent germ available for development, is for the autonomists also crucial to capitalism's demise. New currents in production trigger the rise of "the multitude," and with it, in time, the fruition of something resembling Marx's postcapitalist "social individual": the worker who does tasks that a thing cannot do, whose work is so satisfying it will be done for its own sake, under no distant compulsion or direct domination.²

For Florida, under capitalism's benevolent watch, the ideal of non-alienated labor, performed by the "whole person" en route to self-development, has passed out of the realm of utopian fantasy and into the workplace. A once-tenable distinction between bourgeois and bohemian values has collapsed into the "shared work and lifestyle ethic" that Florida calls "the creative ethos."³ Like bohemians before them, the creative class values diversity, openness, and nonconformity, eschewing "organizational or institutional directives" and embracing city living as freedom from the tradition.⁴ However, like the bourgeoisie, they are also quite willing to connect self-worth to career success, and they feel little "distaste for material things" — not because they wish to grow rich per se, but because they are living in an era of "post-scarcity."⁵ Whereas the bohemian artist suffered for her work, members of the creative class tap into creativity precisely to the extent that they are free from worry about poverty.⁶ Indeed, a successful creative career is important because it means being granted the freedom to

pursue creative inclinations without too much concern for market necessities. Thus materialistic motivations exist in tandem, rather than tension, with the desire for self-expression and personal development; the wish to do creative work and identify with a community of creative people is perfectly reconcilable with the desire to live in prosperity. The creative process need only be organized in such a way that its essential indivisibility is respected, its autonomy assumed and structured into the workplace.

For the autonomists, meanwhile, via immaterial labor — the post-factory work which "produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity" — capital is busily orchestrating the incorporation of creativity into itself.⁷ It is doing this by treating all social experience as a factory, in which the universal inclination toward creative play becomes the laboratory from which new products emerge. The personality of the worker, including her desire for variety and self-expression, are made "susceptible to organization and command."⁸ Thus, when we are all enjoined to explore our subjectivity that by no means does away with the "antagonism" between "autonomy and command," instead, it simply "re-poses the antagonism at a higher level, because it both mobilizes and clashes with the very personality of the individual worker."⁹ The shifting world of available ideas, which the autonomists call "the mass intellect," is something capital is always trying to access and capture, so it creates spaces where novel agglomerations will emerge and be accessible. In this, the "struggle against work" is simply useful. Immaterial production "nurtures, exploits, and exhausts" its labor force by ongoing affective social production of self-sacrificing and self-motivated workers, people who freely offer their labor because it is experienced as non-laborious pleasure or as moral compulsion.¹⁰ Key here is capital's desire for a worker-subject in whom command can simply "reside": workers may disobey command, but disobedience is a prerequisite for productivity.¹¹ For the autonomists, then, Florida's mistake is seeing the commingling of capitalism and creative expression as a benign or even ideal realization of the end of soul-destroying labor. It is, rather, an intensification of exploitation, though it is often experienced as the opposite.

In tandem, as the distinction between work and leisure is eroded, what one experiences and consumes "outside" of labor time becomes part of the production of commodities.¹² As immaterial labor is a matter of social relations *in toto*, and its economic value stems from this fact, for the autonomists the consumer, too, "is inscribed in the manufacturing of the product from its conception."¹³ Consumption doesn't just "realize" the product. It is itself the product, as at once the tracked assumption behind the product's creation and as its desired outcome. Thus, the material reworked by immaterial labor is the general world of subjectivity and the environment in

which it is produced; the content of immaterial labor's commodities is the general social milieu. Immaterial workers satisfy a demand and produce it at the same time. The social world, as the factory, is the space in which the worker is reproduced; all the culture that is consumed works to infect and influence and re-create the consumer's situation. In other words, the consumer is thoroughly incorporated into the cycle of production, and the cultural producer is herself conceived as a consumer, as the member of a class defined by the accoutrements of lifestyle and leisure, as one whose habits of consumption do so much to define her, and whose experiences as a consumer are what generate the ideas that are later codified in rights to intellectual property. The process of immaterial production is thus cyclical and all-pervasive, incorporating everyone.

Having painted this portrait, the autonomists are nevertheless careful to theorize the mass intellect as something that cannot be fully incorporated. In trying to explain this resistance, several look to Marx's mention of a general intellect, especially as articulated in the "Fragment on Machines," where, in Virno's terms, Marx argues that abstract knowledge "begins to become, precisely by virtue of its autonomy from production, nothing less than the principle productive force, relegating parcelized and repetitive labor to a peripheral and residual position."¹⁴ In brief, Virno interprets Marx's short text as support for his own claim that it is perverse to hold that knowledge and the worker exist independently of one another: the general intellect is the mutual interrelation of living labor and machinery, which is the fixed capital in which abstracted knowledge about working processes is embedded; and the knowledge held by the general intellect "cannot be reduced to fixed capital" because it is "inseparable from the interaction of a plurality of living subjects."¹⁵

"Mass intellectuality is the composite group of post-Fordist living labor," Virno writes, and it "cannot be objectified in machinery."¹⁶ Indeed, as the general intellect is constantly recombined and reconstituted within the expanse of living labor, whenever it is translated into fixed capital, a conflict emerges. Capital's constant struggle to fix knowledge is met by living labor's lack of willingness to have its knowledge abstracted. For Virno, the general intellect is, exactly, "the intellect in general": it is the basic human ability to think and process information; it is the inherent creativity possessed by everyone, "rather than the works produced by thought." Post-industrial accumulation taps this unending resource; indeed, it requires the inexhaustible resource potential of the creative impulse, grounded fundamentally in the "potential of labour to execute contingent and unrepeatable statements."¹⁷ This is a social knowledge that is the opposite of that possessed by the new "labour aristocracy." It is the "immeasurable" site of

"heterogeneous effective possibilities." It arises from the faculties for thinking, perception, language, memory, feeling, all part of the "fundamental biological configuration" that distinguishes the human animal.¹⁸ It is a never-ending potentiality — in the autonomists' vocabulary, a "virtuality."¹⁹ It is this that capital attempts to transform into productive labor, and that Hardt and Negri have located at the utopian center of the political promise of "the multitude."

It is in understanding the relationship between this potentiality and its transformation through immaterial labor that the autonomists tend to invoke aesthetic models. Virno prefers to figure innovation as the "virtuosity" of the live performer, whose activity "finds its own fulfillment (that is, its own purpose) in itself, without objectifying itself into an end product ... or into an object which would survive the performance."²⁰ It would seem, then, that real creativity cannot survive transformation into "product" or "object"; its rightful aura cannot be preserved or accessed by others outside a singular moment of its own expression, interpreted as "its own purpose." For his part, Lazzarato applies the literary circuit of "the author, reproduction, and reception."²¹ He positions the author as a consumer who puts together a unique amalgam of materials available within mass intellectuality and then offers up that assemblage of her labor to capital. That offering up is the crucial thing; in its absence one remains and continues to perform as living labor or "virtuoso," capital's ceaseless countermeasure, the thing that it will never fully "subordinate it to its own values."²² In other words, to engage in immaterial production is to author something, which inevitably means to work in a way that "distorts or deflects the social imaginary that is produced in the forms of life." At the same time, though, those forms of life are the ultimate and final source of innovation — in the simple process of being alive, ideas occur — and so the actual production of immaterial commodities is dependent and secondary. Everything is, of course, socially authored, since it is "the whole of the social relation," embodied in the author-work-audience relationship, that bring any kind of meaning "into play."²³ But through the author of immaterial products, who possesses what Lazzarato calls autonomous "synergies," capital will "attempt to control" and "subordinate" these irreducible energies to itself.²⁴

Thus, in the case of immaterial labor's theorists, as for the creative class's enthusiasts, ideas about the status and work of the artist-author shape how they present what contemporary labor entails. For the latter, it seems that the old ideal of the artist's aversion to market success no longer holds. The artist has been subsumed into the creative class, bohemian values persist only as lifestyle choices, and creativity and market circulation are synonymous and unfold in tandem. The authenticity and subjectivity of the creative

act are in no way threatened by market circulation. Instead, they are protected by it. For the former, in turn, the artist is the model for the absorption of subjectivity into the market. She is the figure for any worker who “originates” the authored and authorized discourse that is inseparable from capitalism but separate from something else it cannot contain: inherent human creativity, understood as the variability of the human personality’s infinite potential for recombination.

The Floridean and autonomist viewpoints are thus similar in their assumption that creativity and capital are merged now in some novel ways, as the production of various kinds of symbolic content — information, entertainment, art — have ostensibly become economically dominant, and as artists’ vaunted resistance to routine work has been thus generalized throughout the workforce. But the autonomists try to preserve a space between the “mass intellect” and entrepreneurial appropriation of its products for personal gain. Their theories of virtuosity and virtuality constantly return to what authorized speech cannot capture through immaterial production of intellectual property, and so the sense remains that there is some pressing contradiction between creative expression and work. Their writings evince a clear wish to maintain a sublime mass which is at once outside of property relations and the source of everything available for transposition into them. This wish is perhaps most evident in their continual return to oppositions that are resonantly ethical: quantities are pitted against the unquantifiable; actual products are pitted against future potential for the creation of anything; the model of the solo author is pitted against the collective intelligence that is actually held by everyone and merely appropriated for the author’s use; writing and codification are pitted against the universal possession of language that can be constantly recombined and redeployed; intellectual property rights are pitted against the “the commons” and the multitude; and measure and all it implies about quantification and exchange are pitted against immeasure, figured as the endless fecundity of social knowledge and its irreducibility to exchange relations (or, its unavailability for abstraction in machinery).

Thus, where Florida and the autonomists confer, we find an image of an economy in which individual human creativity has become the vanguard driving force and key productive engine. Where they diverge, we glimpse continued conflict over what it means that so much labor is now being called creative, or that respect for the productive powers of creative impulses is now so general. For Florida and his students and allies, artists are models of successful and fulfilling work within the marketplace, while non-creatives are simply a problem. It isn’t that they have nothing to offer — like the autonomists, Florida states that everyone is creative — but that, because they

are trapped in deadening work, their potential isn’t being accessed, which means “wasting that great reservoir of our creative capital.”²⁵ This represents a problem both for them and for the businesses that might trade in their creativity.

In marked contrast, for the theorists of immaterial labor, these non-creatives are actually where true creativity resides, because their ceaseless ability to recombine is the source of all knowledge. These theorists thus transmogrify those who don’t author — or those who “refuse” — into the only source of resistance to capital, a resistance that capital always does and does not incorporate. So whereas the Floridean approach positions creativity as the market meeting minds, for the autonomists it can only be minds as they meet outside of market logic, as the author becomes any figure whose thinking being is exploited by capital, and also, quite simply, capital itself. Both the figure and the system require that whole social world that remains outside of authorship or authored experience, the source of potential which can’t be reduced to capital. In other words, once your labor has become available for this reduction to product, by expropriating potentiality, you’ve become an author. It is only the non-author, in possession of a non-market mass intellect, who holds on to non-market integrity.

Literary scholars have shown how indispensable imagining the subject as “origin of expression” has been to the history of capitalist cultural markets and of private rights to intellectual property.²⁶ In future writing, I hope to show the relevance of their findings to theories of creative labor, while taking my cue from Michael Ryan’s argument that Negri’s valorization of “expressive subjectivity” depends upon omission of the “instrumental and contextual factors” that are its actual conditions of possibility.²⁷ Ryan laments this as an “absolutism of the subject,” and claims that the individual Negri imagines as embodiment of irreducible difference and source of ceaseless experimentation is continuous with the liberal subject as site of personal choice and self-referencing desire.²⁸ Since Ryan’s appraisal, theories of creative production have tended to extend and generalize the approach to subjectivity he faulted, activating particular figures of artist-authors in the process. The continued life of these figures involves a confluence of social and economic forces that are of precious little interest to Florida or to the autonomists, whose theories tend instead to remove the subject they assume from historical comprehension. Lost in both sets of analyses is, thus, any sense of the contradictory, material, and constitutive histories of artists’ labor and of images of artists at work that subtend the conception of subjectivity they maintain. Labor theories of aesthetic production, as part of a broader political economy of culture, should provide an alternative, by considering, for example, the development of the contradictory relationship between

artists and the markets for their work, or the concomitant mainstreaming of the figure of the artist as valorized mental laborer. Accounting for the historicity and the particular emergence and spread of the vocabulary that makes contemporary labor an act of self-exploration, self-expression, and self-realization is an essential task in denaturalizing the character of contemporary capitalism.

Notes

¹ For pressing critique of the theory of immaterial labor, see Timothy Brennan, "The Empire's New Clothes," *Critical Inquiry* 29 (2003): 337-67. For broad treatment of creative labor, see Mark Banks, *The Politics of Cultural Work* (London: Palgrave, 2007), and Andrew Ross, *Nice Work If You Can Get It* (New York: New York UP, 2009).

² On the "social individual," see Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993) 33; compare Karl Marx, *The Grundrisse* [1857-61] (London: Penguin, 1973) 325, 705-706.

³ Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class* (New York: Basic Books, 2002) 193.

⁴ Florida, *Rise of the Creative Class* 77.

⁵ Florida, *Rise of the Creative Class* 194.

⁶ Florida, *Rise of the Creative Class* 81.

⁷ Maurizio Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labor," in Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt, eds., *Radical Thought in Italy* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996) 133.

⁸ Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labor" 134.

⁹ Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labor" 135.

¹⁰ Tiziana Terranova, "Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy," *Social Text* 63 (2000): 51.

¹¹ Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labor" 136.

¹² Paolo Virno, "General Intellect," translated by Arianna Bove <<http://www.generation-online.org/p/fpvirno10.htm>>, par. 5.

¹³ Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labor" 141.

¹⁴ Paolo Virno, "The Ambivalence of Disenchantment," in Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt, eds., *Radical Thought in Italy* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996) 21. Compare Marx, *Grundrisse* 692-93.

¹⁵ Virno, "General Intellect" par. 6.

¹⁶ Virno, "General Intellect" par. 7.

¹⁷ Virno, "General Intellect" par. 7.

¹⁸ Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, trans. Isabella Bertolotti et al. (Los Angeles: Semiotext[e], 2004) 98.

¹⁹ Virno, "General Intellect" par. 8.

²⁰ Virno, *Grammar* 52.

²¹ Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labor" 144.

²² Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labor" 145.

²³ Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labor" 146.

²⁴ Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labor" 145.

²⁵ Richard Florida, *The Flight of the Creative Class* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005) 188.

²⁶ Two representative studies are Mark Rose, *Authors and Owners: The Invention of Copyright* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993), and Martha Woodmansee, *The Author, Art, and the Market: Rereading the History of Aesthetics* (New York: Columbia UP, 1994).

²⁷ Michael Ryan, *Politics and Culture: Working Hypotheses for a Post-Revolutionary Society* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1989) 46.

²⁸ Ryan, *Politics and Culture* 57.