

Re-Thinking Creative Economy as Radical Social Enterprise

Angela McRobbie

We will soon begin to see the 'creative industry' phenomenon as something specifically linked with the Blair and post-Blair years, starting 1997 and in effect lasting for just more than a decade. Such a positioning allows us both to focus on its character and function and to acknowledge that the politics of arts and culture for the present government will be something very different. Let me begin with an overview of the 'creative decade' where my own focus is inevitably England for the reason that I live in London, and I will also connect with Europe because much of my research work on this topic is carried out in Italy and Germany. Let me also begin with a brief assessment of the New Labour project of promoting the new creative economy. The rise of the talent-led economy can be traced back to the influence of people like Charles Leadbeater and his book *Living on Thin Air*, which carried a blurb by Tony Blair himself. The book provided various ideas and recommendations for encouraging creativity as a source for growth, employment and personal reward. Along with the various Mapping Documents published by the Department of Culture Media and Sport, this shift of direction was in effect multi-functional. Championing figures like Alexander McQueen, Leadbeater was (and is) an advocate for what we might call a 'cultural neo-liberalism'. Here, the remaining social democratic provision in the form of arts education and training is transformed through a new rhetoric to become a space for producing young people who are to be 'entrepreneurs of the self' just as Foucault predicted in his mid-1970s lectures. This is 'soft' cultural neo-liberalism because it rests on a kind of widely admired, or desirable, human attribute, i.e. creativity, which Leadbeater in the spirit of egalitarianism generously attributes to everybody! It is a matter of tapping into the self, and somehow uncovering a unique talent, a set of capacities which can be nurtured and then exploited as the basis for a creative career. When I say this is multi-functional let me summarise its purposes. These are:

a) The extension of this capacity of creativity across the whole population has the air of justice, equality, fairness and democracy, especially when it is linked as it is with terms like 'access' and 'equality of opportunity' to the arts and culture so that they are no longer the preserves of the elite. Thus this agenda can be seen to embody aspects of the traditional Labour or left criticism of the high arts for being hierarchical and unavailable for ordinary working class people. So, the translation of Leadbeater's ideas into policy in the form of Creative Partnerships, or in Cultural Leadership programmes, or in the simple expansion of places on fashion design and similar courses at levels from GCSE or Btec to BA, MA and PhD, has to be seen as simultaneously old and New Labour, and for these reasons generally seen as a good thing! Who could disagree? For these reasons it quickly became a hallmark of the New Labour regime, forward-looking, oriented to young people, and fashionable, even glamorous.

b) But this kind of creative programme is also a way of laying the groundwork for the transformation of work, first for the few, then possibly for the many. As I have argued at length elsewhere there are various transformative



activities embodied in this promotion of creativity. For a start, the emphasis on 'pleasure in work', the idea of finding yourself in creative practice, is very seductive indeed. It appeals to all of our own narcissistic and private desires, that somehow under the right conditions we will plug into a core of talent that will relieve us of the burden of wage labour, a tedious job or unrewarding work. May a thousand novels be written! If only we can all be JK Rowling or Franz Ferdinand! But such a call can be a profoundly effective form of new disciplinarity, a technology of the self as Jacques Donzelot argued. We are increasingly required to 'be creative'. We are expected to tap into our own inner resources and to find a way of using our talents. Indeed not to do so will increasingly be seen as a source of chastisement or even penalty. New subtle forms of cultural capital begin to appear; a creative elite who are able to take advantage of the support on offer from what was New Labour, and the others, who for whatever reasons resist this call, become instead reliant on a normal job and who are then in some ways social if not economic failures because on the party circuit of 'network of sociality' they do not have an interesting creative job to talk about. What I mean is that in recent years there is a requirement to have a working identity which is interesting, even fascinating. For young people this becomes part of their own self-identity, their value in the social world. I am referring largely to those young people who are being trained in the arts and cultural and humanities fields. Many of them in the past would have gravitated to jobs which were socially valuable, if unexceptional, but the 'dividing practices' which accompany the intense

processes of individualisation mean that in work, the person is called upon to be unique, and as a result this means pursuing jobs which appear to be more attractive, even if they have no rights and require long hours. One of my students who gained excellent grades throughout her degree told me that she intended turning the job she had done during her under-graduate degree into a full-time job. She had been working as a party manager for an events company which brought together young single people regularly, not for dating, but for socialising and interesting conversation. My student was an ice-breaker. When I said that surely this was a shallow kind of job to pursue, and that she might think about doing something more socially valuable like working with disadvantaged youths, or take a post-graduate course in Community Work, she said "maybe on the longer term but not for now". But there is an irony here. The creatives themselves come to rely on a second job which is in effect a real job, even though it may be on a project or on a casual

contract. Many of the creatives find themselves earning the bulk of their income from the second job which if they are lucky is a part time public sector job, maybe even in a Job Centre. But on a paid by the hour basis or on a short term contract they do not receive the protections and securities of conventional 'employment'. My research shows that such a strata of young people would be better off opting for the profession of the second job, and retraining to gain entitlements and status and promotion as, say, a qualified 'youth worker' or librarian, rather than someone teaching kids on ASBOs photography on a pay by the hour basis. But this would in many ways mark a moment of personal failure to live up to the dream of the talent-led economy, where the myth of personal creativity is so dominant and everything else second or third best. I will return to this 'choice' and new social divide in the second part of this paper.

c) This tilt to creativity is of course positive in that it does indeed expand the opportunities for many young people in fields of great interest, e.g. visual arts, media, design, popular music, performance studies, etc. And, in addition, there has long been a tradition of radicalism and critical thinking as well as politicisation in the arts and in culture in general. But given that this is now so expanded, and not just for the tiny few who start up bands or set up on their own as a fashion designer, which in the past was a quite unique and unusual thing to do, the emphasis on individual success and self-employment usually omits or discounts an accompanying vocabulary which we might consider as the usual or conventional vocabulary of the

Carrotworkers' Collective are a London-based group of current or ex-interns, mainly from the creative and cultural sectors who regularly meet to think together around the conditions of free labour in contemporary societies. carrotworkers.wordpress.com

Precarity: A Participatory People's Tribunal, London, March 20th 2011
 The Carrot Workers and The Precarious Workers Brigade
www.precariousworkersbrigade.tumblr.com
 Photos by Martin Lesanto-Smith



workplace. There is no space here for trade unions, for collectivity and solidarity, for joint decision-making, for rights and entitlements, for workplace democracy, for maternity leave or paternity leave or sickness benefits. As a result the creative sector finds itself full of young people who are burnt out, exhausted, unable to consider having children, and often self-exploiting on the basis of the 'pleasure in work' factor. In short, the cultural and creative sector has grown to the extent that it now becomes not just a normal occupational sector but in certain cities and geographic locations dominant. Hence the absence of workplace protections becomes all the more significant. We could call this a Los Angeles-isation effect but in fact, as we know from regular labour activities in the US film and TV sector, there is still extensive trade union membership in the film and TV industries. My main point here is that the dominant vocabulary for undertaking creative work under the auspices of UK neo-liberalism and its extension into EU vocabularies is one which shuns 'old' ideas such as protection and entitlement, and favours instead self reliance, ambition, competition and 'talent'. The push was really to move the burden of workplace protection and security away from the 'employers' and onto the shoulders of the individual freelance person. A cultural agenda for encouraging new forms of work was at the same time a symbolic gesture to employers indicating a commitment to lowering their costs of labour. And as I have argued on many occasions, so intense and relentless is the pace in this field there is not just high rates of anxiety, depression and other 'pathologies of precariousness' but there is also a decrease in political awareness through sheer lack of time. Despite the Facebook era, the reality of getting organised is too time-consuming and financially it carries few possibilities of a new contract or project. Hence the network activity is geared towards being sociable and pleasing and endlessly self promoting in order to keep all opportunities open. Overall this has meant depoliticisation and a lack of attention to barriers to access on the basis of gender (and maternity) and race and ethnicity.

d) Even more significant is the way in which the thin-spread of creative work functions to disguise the normalisation of under-employment. Highly qualified but under-employed people under the age of 40 have become a common topic of discussion in Italy, Germany and France. This has given rise to all kinds of mini-job schemes and work-insertion programmes. Under-employment in the West is an inevitable outcome of post-Fordism, new technology and globalisation, and the outsourcing of labour to cheaper-to-produce countries. What creative work does is provide a frenzy of activity, projects and excitement which distracts attention away from the downtime between projects. In addition, creative projects disrupt the normal means of measuring and rewarding working time, since so many new projects, embarked on during downtime, are unpaid, they are done 'on spec'. The relation between paid and unpaid work is constantly jumbled and opaque. It is too time consuming and possibly unproductive to spend this time applying for Jobseeker's Allowance for a period of just a month or so, more productive to look for

more work, which is exactly the point. Creative work functions both to ease the pain of under-employment and to ensure the decline of the unemployment society. I would suggest that the new creative economy has become the distinctively British way of dealing with structural and seemingly irreversible changes to the work-society.

My second argument concerns the present. On the one hand there will, for sure, be a significant decrease in resources across the world of arts and culture, including education and training. We will soon look back at the 1997-2007 decade as one where the state mobilises substantial resources to support a neo-liberalisation effect in the creative sector. I have already argued that this attempt to neo-liberalise was, however, limited and constrained, if not opposed by elements within the residual social democratic forces embedded across the public sector. We have all struggled over the years to subvert or 're-territorialise' these strategies so as to somehow adapt them at the point of implementation. We can see how vocabularies of entrepreneurship came to be flagged up, but somehow often put to different more critical usage. This has permitted at least contestation and critique to flourish, even within the de-politicisation effect I just referred to. By engaging with issues such as obvious sexism in a de-regulated and informal working environment, academics and researchers have been able to show the consequences of the freelance culture and there have also been initiatives within the sector itself such as groups like the *Carrot Workers Collective* and *Making a Living*. (See also Zoe Romano's work with Italian fashion designers.) But more questions arise as the present government starves the universities and art schools of funds and forces through massive fee rises. It is hard to assess what this will mean for all of the courses which have supported the rise of the new creative economy in the UK and for the students themselves. It is also likely that a new discussion will arise about how to theorise the position of the universities struggling to survive by themselves entrepreneurialising. We will need a new vocabulary to understand the proximity, the immanence of all of us caught up in this culture-machine. We cannot walk away from these issues. We teach students to develop a critical understanding, how does that tally with also encouraging self-reliance and entrepreneurship? How in turn will this freelance world respond to shrinking possibilities? The present situation is one which will see that the public sector of arts and culture profoundly diminished. The jobs which I also mentioned earlier, the youth workers and community workers and social workers who are well qualified and who have professional pathways for their careers will also be reduced in number, substantially. Neither defeatism nor old fashioned militancy will suffice in circumstances such as these. I would like to propose a renewal of radical social enterprise and co-operatives. Such self-organised collectives would also be a way of providing comparable working structures across diverse occupations such as social workers/community workers and artists. Already many artists and creative people are working in communities and on social projects. (The European Social Fund has supported all

sorts of media-literacy and street education programmes which in turn have drawn on the expertise of artists, designers, musicians etc.) In addition, the politics of local democracy might well also be resurrected through such activities. This would involve various lessons from history, in fact close attention to the experiments by women's groups and by radical publishers, theatre workshops and other forms of de-centralised and autonomous work organisations. The lessons from the 1970s have quite a lot to offer in this respect. The Italian Marxists and neo-Marxists who are currently attractive to young intellectuals in the creative sector, i.e. Negri, Virno and Berardi, now and again refer to famous initiatives such as the Milan Women's Bookstore. But in fact there were thousands of other equally luminous radical initiatives which were also sustainable in Germany; hundreds of child care centres called *Kinderladen*. And in Northern Europe also there were play centres and art centres for children. In the UK, photography workshops were run on a shoestring, especially for those excluded from more mainstream training, or for minorities such as young black people, and young gay and lesbian people. Such initiatives, after all, emerged out of activism and radical feminism and in the beginning such work was often unpaid, or semi-paid. I am not proposing we go back in time, but that we develop a stronger critique of the limits of self-reliance and its obvious psycho-pathologies in the creative and social sectors. I'd like to suggest that we consider Sennett's ideas of craft as an alternative, and with this further consideration of his notion of what I would paraphrase as a 'good day's work well done'. I am interested to see what scope there might be for a creative ethos of social care and compassion. To sum up, we need to be wary of the term 'social enterprise' as it is bandied about by the present government. It is too bland and ridden with clichés about 'making a difference' or 'putting something back'. But if structural under-employment is here to stay, and if we have in the UK over countless generations trained intelligent and energetic young people in the fields of arts and culture, it does not take such a huge step of imagination to see how the downtime could become a space for developing radical strategies for social-co-operation, for better care of children and young people, for better provision of care and attention to disadvantaged populations, including the elderly for renewing civic society and for urban and environmental improvement. This would not be about volunteering but about a new injection of hope in the not-for-profit sector.

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