

## Notions of work under a regime of mass innovation,

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*This is a work in progress, not to be cited*

### **From the creative industries to social creativity**

Some authors argue that the birth of the “creative industries” was triggered in part as an answer to a massive economic crisis detonated by the processes of industrial transformation started during the 70’s. This decade was to witness how neoliberalism emerged as a political force which would be consolidated with the successful election of Margaret Thatcher as a prime minister in the United Kingdom in 1979 and Ronald Reagan’s election as the president of the United States after being governor of California in 1981. The massive privatization of public enterprises and the dismantling of traditional industrial enterprises such as mines, factories, etc. would be at the core of an immense number of social transformations which would have severe consequences on the ways in which we understand work, leisure or life. All these changes also seemed to justify a number of urban transformation and regeneration processes which had the tertiarization and attraction of financial investment to a great number of cities as its ultimate aim. It is in this context in which the idea of small scale ‘vibrant and creative’ companies were to be promoted in order to replace the old industrial economic models, opening up work opportunities to a new generation of ‘creative’ people who, as some authors claim, “refused to live the life of their parents” (Leadbeater & Oakley, 1999:15), and did not want to commit their life to “big corporations and corporate structures” (Florida, 2002). These creative industries were also to help regenerate working class neighbourhoods and derelict industrial quarters, opening the city up to investment and helping to increase the land price for the real state market.

The UK was to become a witness of a huge number of public schemes aimed at promoting these creative industries and helping to forge these “culturepreneurs” who were to work in this new work regime. From the *Creative Forum for Culture and the Economy* promoted by Arts and Business in 1994 to the *Cool Britannia* campaign developed by the newly elected New Labor party in 1997, with the *Creative Industries Task Force* chaired by Chris Smith as a new political player, to smaller initiatives such as *the Club* at the ICA, the *Fourth Room*<sup>1</sup> or *Creative London* endorsed by the GLA we see how the state feels the need to subscribe and promote this new economic paradigm. All these organizations were aimed at promoting these small scale industries, which to an extent had Piore and Sabel’s (Piore & Sabel, 1986) ethos of small and highly clustered firms behind. These were to emerge with the help of public funding, but also, with a big amount of investment of these new cultural entrepreneurs eager to spend their time and resources trying to edify these economic structures.

The expectations put on the creative industries were high and a number of reports generated at the time all seemed to coincide on the growth potential (see GLA, 2002) that these companies could achieve. Now, almost ten years after this boom, the few public documents that trace these schemes seem to present a grimmer picture (see

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed account of these initiatives see Davies & Ford (2000) ‘Culture Clubs’  
<http://www.infopool.org.uk/cclubs.htm>

Freeman, 2007). Besides the extremely precarious work conditions that sustained these industries, which have been widely debated by a number of scholars and activists (Vishmidt 2005, Mollona 2007, Ruido and Rowan 2007), their growth potential was never accomplished, in part due to the inability of these agents to economize their activity, but also, due to the almost impossible achievable expectations put on a delicate and contingent sector. So despite the large amount of free labour cultural producers put into these companies, self sacrifice, personal involvement (including the help of parents, partners, etc.), and private but also public investment, a big number of these creative industries did not manage to stabilize their economies and grow as a sector and always remained a network of discontinuous small enterprises, dependent on public funding and chance.

All these companies were edified to pool on the creativity extracted from their workers, and notions of talent or excellence were easily labelled on to a generation of young cultural producers eager to invest their personal resources into their enterprises. One could argue that economically the success of these companies relied on two main assets: wetware and intellectual property, being the latter a way to economize the previous. During the following paper I intend to argue that there has been a change of focus and understanding on where creativity lies and who should exploit it, so the creative industries will no longer be the centre of attention and production of creativity, instead we will see how the “social body” as such will come as front runner in this race for creativity. All this has also been followed by a big shift in policy which will have as a consequence the re-branding of the creative industries departments, who from now will be known as innovation departments, and some of the schemes and programmes destined to promote the creative industries have now started focusing on the still under defined notion of innovation. Trying to come to grips with this notion I have been carrying out ethnographic work as part of a research project with YProductions<sup>2</sup> and Clara Piazuelo, this work is still in progress, but still I will try to advance some of the conclusions we are gathering at the end of this paper. A very important fact on which this change of discourse has been constructed has to do with the acknowledgment that people still continue being creative even though part of the funding destined to promote creative had been cut back. Some of the most important cultural contributions of the last 10 years have been made away from the scope of the creative industries and such important contributions as can be free software or wikipedia, de online open encyclopaedia, have been produced by a network of creative people willing to spend their time working on a collaborative project whose economic returns they were very unlikely going to enjoy. Along this paper we will see how this new productive power, that is people’ creativity is being conceptualized and what kind of strategies are being designed to access it.

### **Society as a creative and productive force**

I will refer to this new source of productive power as social creativity, but I am aware that there currently are a number of definitions and terms willing to describe this emergent social reality, which in some cases will come to complement each other, in others, will draw a more complex reality. Still most of these theories will intend to describe a new productive force that lies in the body of a number of social agents who inhabit the cities. These theories will describe an extremely important fact, the social body, that is, meshworks of peoples, technologies, cultures, different identities, ethnic backgrounds and economic classes will combine in a number of different ways, allowing forms of social creativity to emerge. These theories will displace the traditional creative agents such as artists, designers or writers, from the core of creative production, and will acknowledge that they are just part of a bigger process of cultural and creative production, that will happen beyond the limits of policy or in many cases,

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<sup>2</sup> [www.ypsite.net](http://www.ypsite.net)

the economy. In this sense, society will be perceived not only a set of consumers, but as a source of production, having a much major role to play in an always changing production system eager to introduce cheap sources of labour and research into its mechanisms.

During my study I have encountered a number of different definitions or theories willing to come to grips with this transformation, and although, most of these concepts are willing to identify similar patterns, the political or economic programme behind them will highlight different perspectives or approaches. These will come under different names such as: mass creativity, creative classes, social creativity, creative fluxes, hidden innovation, hacker spirit, mass participation, social wealth, milieus innovateurs, creative basins, general intellect, multitudes etc. and without willing to be controversial (I am very aware that Charles Leadbeater's "mass innovation" and Paolo Virno's "general intellect" do not intentionally depict the same social structures or have as an aim to define a new type of worker), I will argue that the coincidences among all these different approaches are so numerous, that I believe that comparing some of them can constitute an interesting exercise.

- I will start by analyzing a concept originally put forward by the post-autonomous thinkers Antonella Corsani and Maurizio Lazaratto (1996) which has later been endorsed by a number of scholars such as Emmanuel Rodriguez (2007). Under the name of "creative basins" they intended to highlight a social creative potential which lies in a heterogeneous clusters of subjects who will find ways of collaborating and working in emergent cultural and social structures. (to be extended)
- From a completely different political perspective we see the consolidation of a highly controversial concept put forward by the economist and urban analyst Richard Florida: the creative classes. With this label he describes a new social group comprised by "creative people" who will prefer to live in "creative and tolerant places" which are a source of added value for the companies for whom they work. Acknowledging that "creativity is the driving force of economic growth" (2002:xxvii) Florida will try to understand the nature of this creativity and the people from who it emanates. (to be extended)
- In a similar fashion the author and political advisor Charles Leadbeater has written about a change of paradigm which he anticipates as the era of mass creativity. With this term he intends to highlight a moment of mass participation that will give rise to a "society of mass innovation, a place where creativity and innovation are everyday activities, practised in many settings, by many people. Innovation as not just something done for the masses but by the masses" (2006:4). (to be extended)
- Another concept that I believe worth talking about is the notion of "consumption driven innovation", which acknowledges the role that the public and consumers have in order to promote or shape given innovations. It will also highlights the need that private firms have to listen and be more aware of social needs and uses. (to be extended)

All these concepts should not be confused with the widely spread notion of "social innovation" which was born as a way to describe a set of practices carried out by a new number of economic agents as NGO's or social movements, and is used to describe the innovations triggered by new social needs or designed to have an important social impact. Under this category we can find technologies designed to produce sustainable

sources of energy born under the consciousness of climate change or fair trade products promoted to encourage a more sustainable global economy.

### **Conclusions.**

We could argue that social creativity is now seen as a new productive resource, but also, as a completely new source of labour. Following the ideas put forward by people like Maurizio Lazzarato or Toni Negri we see how this huge pool of immaterial labour is changing the ways in which firms are going to research and develop their products. Social creativity as a space for the production of knowledge can complement perfectly R+D departments, externalizing on to society some of the core features of private firms which now have to devise instruments that will enable them to capture part of this social wealth. It is in this context in which the notion of innovation makes full sense, from a Schumpeterean perspective, an innovation is only such if it successfully manages to hit a market and make a profit. Following this logic, we could argue that in this context innovation describes the moment in which part of this social creativity is captured by a firm, corporation, the public sector or an economic agent and is used to successfully pursue an economic goal. If this is so, public institutions and policy do not need to encourage creative industries no longer, but promote and find ways to enhance this social creativity on one hand, and on the other find ways in which to access this resource, helping economic actors to tap into this wealth. In this sense, we could argue that the only thing that has actually managed to survive and become part of this new structure of production is the working ethos that underlied the creative industries. Under the premises of collaboration, participation and willing to be creative, we could say that we are not only witnesses to a process of unleashed social creativity, but we could be facing an era of mass exploitation.

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