The Labor Factor in the Creative Economy

A Marxist Reading

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In the advent of the creative economy, creativity is turned into a tool for economic development. Through the reification of creativity, freedom is celebrated, and a new type of democracy is conjured up, which is not based on political participation but on free access to creativity—everybody can produce creatively, and everybody can consume creative products according to individual tastes. Within such a discourse of celebration, what must be strategically ignored is the labor dimension essential to creative production. The creative economy relies on but also dismisses the materiality of creative labor. My focus in this essay is precisely to explicate the labor factor that makes up this creative economy.

One of the most important theoretical works on the concept is Maurizio Lazzarato’s “Immaterial Labor,” in which he argues that the old dichotomy between manual/material and mental/immaterial labor has failed to grasp the new nature of production activities. According to Lazzarato, the late 1970s witnessed a new phase of capitalist production that emphasizes the value of communication, which in turn acts as the interface negotiating the relationship between production and consumption. It is also in this new kind of commodity/commodification that the dichotomy between material and immaterial labor falls apart. Lazzarato demonstrates two models of immaterial labor: Simmel accepts the division of labor founded on the opposition between manual and intellectual labor, whereas Bakhtin defines immaterial labor as the diffusion of the two. Lazzarato argues that Simmel runs the risk of legitimizing the
regulation and mystification of the social process of creation and innovation because, in Simmel’s model, members of the upper middle classes create fashion, and the lower classes attempt to imitate them. Lazzarato finds Bakhtin’s call to supersede the division between material labor and intellectual labor more productive, in that it offers a view to understanding how creativity is a social process.

Of greatest significance in Lazzarato’s article is his advancement of a new theory of social production that diffuses the boundaries between manual and intellectual labor, which, he believes, would also provide room to demythologize the division of the two classes to which the two kinds of labor supposedly belong. Lazzarato is pertinent in identifying the increasing overlap of the two kinds of labor; however, I believe such overlap is not maintained through mutual diffusion: the two logics exist simultaneously in new global conditions, and their coexistence does not cancel either out, but intensifies both. Unlike Lazzarato, I would argue that creative labor does not embody the disappearance of boundaries between manual and intellectual labor, but is a unique function that demonstrates the intensification of the contradictions between the two logics.

In fact, the current creative economy is saturated with an abhorrence of traditional manual labor. People in the West lament the moving of factories to developing countries, but the fact is that fewer and fewer educated people are attracted to routinized production work. The migration of monotonous assembly-line work is in part willed by the citizens of wealthy nations, so that they—and particularly members of the younger generation—can partake in more “innovative” and “rewarding” careers. I believe that Alvin Toffler’s claim—that traditional labor has become less important in the new information society, and the new hero is the innovator, who combines imaginative knowledge with action—is clearly one-sided. Traditional labor is not less important; it is just less seen. Sweatshops are exported to faraway lands, rendering them invisible to most of the developed world, which retains only the most “desirable” sorts of work.

Toffler also argues the disappearance of labor exploitation in the new economy: industrial workers were exploited because they owned few of the tools of production, but today the most powerful wealth-amplifying tools reside in workers’ heads, which are irreplaceable, and therefore unexploitable. But we know that exploitation of the creative class continues to intensify in the developed world—the number of working hours increases as job security worsens, although this type of labor is much more desired than traditional labor. In the new economy, labor is seemingly bifurcated: regressive, exploitable manual labor is considered obsolete and should be replaced by creative works and knowledge productions. In the affluent parts of the world, the new economy dematerializes not only commodities but also labor, in the sense that work is packaged as leisure, and hardship
and boredom are effaced by the promises of creativity and satisfaction. This eradication of traditional labor and the romanticization of creative labor in the West are made possible by exploitation of third-world labor (or third-world populations in the first world). Labor exploitation has become impossible to discuss among the new creative workers, as exploitation is thought to have vanished.

The problematic dichotomization between the first and third worlds leads to, or is partly justified by, the false dichotomization of the two types of labor; intellectual and manual labors are concentrated in completely different geographical locations and political economies to allow the opposite logics to operate alongside each other. The developed world therefore is empowered by the works of “symbolic analysis,” to borrow Robert B. Reich’s term; scientists, researchers, and designers in the West busily sell their ideas and discoveries and plan globally. Abstractions and isolated either as the figures of jobs lost by the developed world or as human exploitation in the developing world—both of which could be used to justify further claims of globalization and development—actual labor vanishes, or is distorted, in the formulation of the creative economy. In order to demonstrate that the equation of creative work with nonwork is ideological, we must reconnect the relationship between creativity and labor. It is important to bring labor back to the investigation of the creative economy in order to, first, demonstrate that creativity is not just an aesthetic concept but also a social praxis, and second, to examine how the new creative economy continues to harbor exploitation while investing in fantasized notions of creativity. The notion of creative economy should not mislead us into believing that creativity has replaced capital as an end in itself. As long as this economy remains firmly grounded in capitalism, the ultimate object remains capital; and labor is an essential form of input.

The Artist versus the Creative Worker

In the modernity project, the individualistic controlling subject in the domain of art and culture is the artist-genius, whose expressions are believed to be the results of his or her unique talents, and whose creativity cannot be replicated. This notion of the artist can be seen as the ideological antithesis of, on the one hand, alienated industrial workers who lack opportunities to engage in their work creatively and, on the other hand, the masses who revere, or are ignorant of, artwork. However, the actual economic conditions governing the creative worker currently are vastly different from any idealized world of art: art is the personal expression of the artist, and creative commodities are produced for the consumption of the masses; and whereas the notion of the artist suggests autonomy and freedom, creative labor operates under the division of labor, so that no
individual can claim complete ownership of a product. What I really want to demonstrate in this essay is that the two logics are not dichotomized in the new economy, but logics of aesthetic production and industrial production simultaneously structure creative labor, whose products, then, can be considered both artistic and accessible to the masses. A careful investigation of the tensions and the negotiations of the two strains of logic should give us a unique angle from which to understand how the current creative economy incorporates creativity as a new condition of late-capitalist production.

I believe that any criticism of the creative economy must start with a careful analysis of the author function. The concept of moral rights is steeped in the Romanticist understanding of the artist and has a strong possessive connotation, based on the premise that the author owns the work. We should guard against the exploitation that results from distributor-based copyright discourse, but a nostalgic return to the notion of the autonomous artist does little to help us analyze the creative economy, which is only a continuous development of author-based modernity.

The creative economy continues to rely on the Romanticist notion of the genius-artist to reify creativity, while at the same time overcoming the “inefficiency” associated with artist discourse. The creative worker might still be characterized by his or her personal artistic sensibilities, but he or she also rationally weighs both creativity and business considerations to produce salable products. The main activities in the late-capitalist economy are centered on consumer desire for identification and self-expression, and this economy advances subjective and unpredictable evaluations of taste, making notions such as styles and trends extremely volatile—but profitable. The creative worker is mythologized as the source of these transient but priceless ideas, and the consumer buys freedom and self-realization from the producer via the commodity. The discourse of “talent” built around creative labor has afforded the worker entry into a privileged class, perpetuating the illusion that it is the creative class, instead of the capitalists, that leads the way in the current economy. However, while the discourse of the genius persists, the concept of artistic creation is most estranged by the commodification of creativity. Marx reminds us that the more the logic of exchange values dominates the production process, the more laborers will be alienated: “The need for exchange and for the transformation of the production into a pure exchange value progresses in step with the division of labor, i.e., with the increasingly social character of production. . . . What originally appeared as a means to promote production becomes a relation alien to the producers.” Marx’s description of industrial labor now applies to creative labor: the artist, who supposedly produces for the sake of his or her own self-expression, is estranged by his or her own products, which are subject to capitalist logic—these
works are no longer ends in themselves, but are meaningful largely in their exchange values.

The simultaneous existence and mutual reinforcement of the logics of art and commerce is not new, but has been structured over the course of the development of modern art in the West, in which the art market developed in tandem with the discourse of the genius-artist. Since the seventeenth century the commodification of art and the discourse of the master artist have mutually penetrated each other. What distinguishes the uniqueness of our current creative age is not only the mutual support of the two domains of art and commerce, but also how the new category of the creative worker simultaneously embodies two seemingly oppositional logics. The master artist, although embedded in the art market, remains at a distance from commercial activities pertaining to his or her works due to the supposed separation of artistic production and reception. But the creative worker does not have this privilege, and his or her labor is situated squarely in a dense economic reality.

Scholars are increasingly paying attention to the actual working conditions of creative workers. There are new employment patterns in the new creative economy that allow management to obscure labor exploitation under the guise of flexible working hours and freelance employment and that put workers’ career stability, job prospects, and fringe benefits in jeopardy. While many in the new generation of workers identify with the new workplace freedom, workers are also made to be responsible for their own career development and security—during layoffs, people quickly become disillusioned with workplace democracy. Some scholars explore how government initiatives can provide better working environments for these new cultural workers; others promote the democratization of creativity to discourage certain parties’ monopolization of the creative discourse. In general, more and more scholars are devoted to studies of the actual exploitation of workers involved in the creative economy, fighting against this new social structure whose neoliberal outlook hides more severe forms of exploitation. A recent Hollywood film offers us a glimpse of the complex intertwining—and mutual rejection—of artist discourse and management logic simultaneously embodied in the same creative worker. I choose to discuss a Hollywood film as an illustrative example here, instead of a real social case, partly because many empirical studies have already been conducted, and also because of the unique ideological value that Hollywood cinema maintains and which is constitutive of the creative economy. This film has the quality of both aggrandizing the phantasmagoria of creative labor and subtly revealing the repressed exploitation.

*The Devil Wears Prada* (dir. David Frankel, 2006) evokes the glamour as well as the gloom of the working environment of the creative economy. Miranda Priestly, chief editor of the prestigious fashion magazine *Runway,*
embodies the most powerful type of creative labor because it is her aesthetic
taste that determines which designers get media exposure, and she dictates
global fashion trends. She is not an actual designer, but the “arbiter” of
taste. She is both manager and artist, and uses her talent and power to
to control global fashion. The film revolves around the trust that develops
between Miranda and her new assistant, Andrea, who initially disdains the
pretentiousness and the lack of social importance of the fashion business.
In spite of Miranda’s ruthlessness and the submission and transformation
of Andrea, the film is a clear endorsement of the power and glamour of
fashion, indirectly reinforcing Hollywood’s role in constructing fashion.

But both the aura of art and the brutality of commerce loom large
in the characterization of Miranda. Miranda’s career is inherently linked
to a diversified range of labor, from designers to factory laborers; and her
power is based on the hierarchy among these different forms of labor.
In one of their earlier confrontations, Miranda lectures Andrea on the
sacredness of her work, stating that any single decision she makes will
determine the livelihoods of thousands of people working at the various
levels of the fashion industry. In the hierarchy of the new global division
of labor, Miranda epitomizes the pinnacle of work (or nonwork), which
controls and coordinates the actual production taking place in, say, third-
world factories. But the film is not just a glorification of this position, and
it can also be seen as an effort to strip Miranda of her aura by exposing
fierce competitions behind the scenes. She not only possesses the aura
of the artist, but also embodies the treacherous entrepreneur. She is set
against Nigel, the magazine’s creative director, who has helped Miranda
to make creative decisions in the past. But when Nigel thinks that he can
finally leave Miranda and embark on a creative life of his own, Miranda
makes a scapegoat of him in order to preserve her own job—Nigel’s new
job is then given to Miranda’s rival.

Not only Miranda, but also the film itself, vacillates between the
 glorification and the condemnation of fashion. Seemingly, the morality
of the film can be summarized in Miranda’s accusation of Andrea: “You
sold your soul the first time you put on that pair of Jimmy Choos.” And
at the end of the film Andrea decides to abandon fashion and embark on
a journey of self-realization. But the thrust of the film is clearly Andrea’s
coming of age through her life in fashion, and the film’s narrative structure
and visual pleasure is clearly organized around the display of fashion. We
could therefore read two different sets of ideological values in this film:
fashion as capitalist vanity ultimately to be discarded; and fashion as
creativity, freedom, and self-realization, which characterize the essence
of creative labor. This dual set of values assigned to fashion makes up
Miranda’s subjectivity. The struggles between Miranda and Nigel or those
between Miranda and Andrea could be seen as externalizing Miranda’s
own internal tensions: she is torn between the logic of art and the logic of commerce she simultaneously embodies. In spite of—or perhaps due to—her arrogance and selfishness, Miranda absorbs the complete attention and devotion of the people around her. But the artistic aura she embodies is also demythologized by her own submission to power. She, like all creative workers, possesses a split personality because she must both self-actualize and fulfill competitive market demands at the same time. The film resolves these tensions by separating Miranda and Andrea. However, in reality, the actual operation of creative labor cannot be differentiated between “good” artistic qualities and “bad” market calculations—and this, I think, is a unique feature of creative labor that merits further exploration.

Creative Labor: Input and Processing

Marxist discussion of raw materials is valuable to our understanding of creative labor because the new economy is characterized by the feeding of creativity—as one more type of raw material—into the chain of production. In classical Marxism, there are three elements necessary for capitalist production: raw material, labor power, and machinery; these three elements are the material embodiments of the “self-expansion” of capital. Simply speaking, the value of an exchangeable good is determined by the labor and the machinery required to transform specific raw materials into commodities, and capital is formed through the exchange of such values. In other words, labor and machines are treated largely as tools employed to transform raw materials into commodities.

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\text{Industrial Labor + Technology} \\
\text{Raw Materials} \rightarrow \text{Tangible Commodity}
\]

In the production of intellectual property, the input is not tangible raw material but intangible knowledge, ideas, or expressions, which are provided by the creative worker and transformed via technological mediation into commodities—whether something as “simple” as writing down musical notation or as complex as putting together a Hollywood movie. In the creative economy, the factory is also replaced by a computer, so that industrial labor disappears into the creative worker working comfortably on his or her own, holding a cup of coffee with jazz music playing in the background.

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\text{Technology} \\
\text{Ideas} \rightarrow \text{Intellectual Property} \\
(\text{Creative Labor})
\]

The two formulas differ most clearly in the form of input: tangible raw materials in traditional industrial production are replaced by abstract
ideas and knowledge, conceived and organized by a creative agent to produce intellectual property. Theoretically, a creative idea is not depleted after exploitation, and a single idea can be applied to an infinite number of products. The ever-renewing trend of “glam” in the fashion industry, for example, derives partly from 1970s glam rock, whose visual dimensions were highly influenced by the pop art of the 1960s. Indeed, David Bowie has been a specter perennially haunting the fashion business in different forms. However, “glam,” in an abstract way, can be seen as a raw material to be applied in different creative processes for different creative products. We could describe this characteristic as “nonrival”—as an idea can be shared infinitely. The economics of intellectual property, therefore, might be described not in terms of scarcity but of abundance. Many argue that this inexhaustible dimension of intellectual production is the key feature of the creative economy, in contrast to industrial capitalism’s basis in competition for limited resources.

However, a simple differentiation between scarcity and abundance does not truly describe the differences between the creative economy and the traditional industrial economy. First, we must note that in Marxism, traditional raw materials also have an inexhaustible dimension. According to Marx, “the object of labour counts as raw material only when it has already undergone some alteration by means of labour.” To Marx, raw materials differ from natural resources: natural resources are only those means of production supplied by nature without human assistance—such as land, wind, and water—and create use-value without contributing to the formation of exchange value. In all other operations of capitalism that create exchange values, raw materials themselves must be understood as products of labor. Raw materials, in other words, are both products of labor and means of production. Cotton, for example, is both a product of industrial extraction and a piece of raw material for further industrial manipulation. “Hence we see that whether a use-value is to be regarded as raw material, as instrument of labour or as product is determined entirely by its specific function in the labour process, by the position it occupies there.” His interest lying not in the primitive process of animalistic survival but in the ways an advanced economy functions, Marx emphasizes that raw materials are not collected to be consumed, but are embedded in the chain of production. They must be constantly used and reappropriated because it is through the incessant process of production and consumption that surplus values are created. Therefore, in the chain of production, raw materials do not stay unchanged, but are constantly transformed, consumed, and reappropriated to facilitate the production of capital.

I want to emphasize that Marx does not understand raw materials in terms of abundance or scarcity, as they are not inert and waiting to be exhausted, but are always worked over by labor. Raw material in itself does
not interest Marx; it is the applied labor that is vital to our understanding of capitalist production. It is through the processing of raw materials, via labor, that capitalism generates and recoups its energy. As Marx describes the capitalist mechanism of raw material production:

On the one hand, the immediate effect of machinery is to increase the supply of raw material: thus, for example, the invention of the cotton gin increased the production of cotton. On the other hand, the cheapness of the articles produced by machinery and the revolution in the means of transport and communication provide the weapons for the conquest of foreign markets. By ruining handicraft production of finished articles in other countries, machinery forcibly converts them into fields for the production of its raw material. Thus India was compelled to produce cotton, wool, hemp, jute and indigo for Great Britain.22

What Marx describes is a powerful circular mechanism: raw materials are produced to become other forms of raw material. While labor of the developing world continues to be exploited, production efficiency is greatly improved by industrial machinery. This process of constant harvesting of raw materials then drives colonialism and imperialism, which further expands the production of raw materials, and therefore capital.

This Marxian understanding of raw material as continuous, inexhaustible, and constantly transforming applies also to intellectual property, and our understanding of creative labor would be productively enriched by taking into account the continuous nature of raw materials. To return to our second formula, the labor factor is effaced in the production of creative commodities because ideas are thought to be produced effortlessly. But on a closer look, labor is required both in the production of ideas—in the various forms of training and experimentation, as well as group discussions and collaboration—and, like all other modern forms of commodities, labor is also required to transform ideas, as raw material, into commodities.

Therefore, the labor factor in the production of intellectual property is manifested in at least two connected forms: labor that initiates ideas (CL1) and that which transforms creative input (CL2):

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\text{Technology} + \text{Creative Labor} / CL^2 \\
\text{Ideas} \quad \rightarrow \quad \text{Intellectual Property} \\
\text{(Creative labor} / CL^1)\]

Marx argues that raw material is not the origin of production but is embedded in the incessant chain of production; as such, labor is also embedded in the raw material. The production of intellectual property follows a similar logic, in that there is also no absolute origin of the creative idea as implied in the traditional artist-genius discourse, and therefore the two types of creative labor (CL1 and CL2) cannot be separated. The new
ideas one is able to come up with are necessarily versions of the products of previous cultural productions, and both CL₁ and CL₂ involve selection, processing, and recycling of “old” ideas into “new” ones. Be it tangible commodity or intangible intellectual property, the production input must be an output of a previous production process, but at the same time the material is consumed and transformed in order to produce surplus value. Therefore, as is the case in the capitalist mode of production, creativity, like traditional raw materials, cannot be simply understood as either scarce or abundant, but it needs labor input to introduce it to the capitalist system.

In fact, the labor involved in the production of intellectual property is much more complex than that of traditional property, and the identity of a creative worker resides not only in his or her output; he or she is also consumer and tastemaker. In his discussion of the rise of the creative class, Richard Florida discusses not only its work, but he also elaborately documents its lifestyle. The creative class is admired not only for its labor but also for its consumption, as well as the intricate overlap between work and leisure manifested among this group of people. Members of this creative class consume their own products, and they themselves define what style is. Due to the quasi-artist status given to creative laborers, not only are they passive consumers, but they are also their own critics, and they shape and endorse trends. In the case of advertising, a profession that heavily manipulates the notion of creativity, the success of agencies and individuals is directly linked to awards received; the power to dictate and shape creativity is governed by the profession itself. This phenomenon is described as “peer regard.” Andy C. Pratt argues that “peer regard works most effectively in fuzzy, fast-moving environments that are about ‘quality’ not ‘quantity’: industries driven by fashion and consumption changes are a good case.” I agree with Pratt that in the new creative industries it is the common task of peers to shape what style is and what creativity is, but I believe that not only quality but also quantity must be highlighted in the creative economy, in the sense that abstract creativity and rational calculation constantly negotiate with and complement each other.

Contemporary creative workers also exhibit strong entrepreneurial abilities. Creative workers tend to be freelancers, or have employment that is usually short-term and insecure. In general, they are responsible for their own careers, so they need to take risks, develop their own networks, and readily adapt to changing markets. In order to maintain their own competitiveness, they need to be innovative, flexible, and sometimes aggressive in order to gain access to the latest knowledge and opportunities provided by the market. At the same time, they need to maintain good interpersonal skills, build trust networks, and offer and receive peer support. As a result, many creative workers lead lives very similar to those of entrepreneurs, and they manage their career more as entrepreneurs.
than as artists, constantly coping with risks while remaining open to new career breaks. Dialectically, they manage their careers as much as they are managed. As Stefano Harney argues, the creative industries are primarily a manifestation of the logic of management, organizing labor in such a way that it is not art that is commodified, but those who produce art who are commodified by the creative industries. 28 Between the dynamics of management and self-management, the creative worker is both empowered and disempowered.

Despite—and because of—the trend toward flexibility, spaces for independent work are actually shrinking. It is clear that the components of creative freedom and individualism inherent in the traditional artist discourse are not compatible with the components of peer evaluation and collective contribution inherent in the creative laborer discourse. The notion of “freedom” continues to be circulated, but it does not really describe the mode of production of the creative worker so much as it legitimizes job insecurity. 29 In fact, creativity poses hidden threats to our creative economy, and discipline must be enforced to keep creativity contained. To be commodified for mass consumption, the components of freedom associated with creativity must be restrained. 30

Marissa Ann Mayer, vice president of search product and user experience at Google, justifies the company’s exploitation of its creative labor by arguing that creativity triumphed over and benefited from “rules.” By delimiting how many designers work on each new product and for how long, management limits the company’s investment. Mayer argues that this limitation is in fact good for creativity, as their designers come up with better ideas and throw away bad ones faster. As Mayer argues, “constraints shape and focus problems and provide clear challenges to overcome. Creativity thrives best when constrained.” 31 While this creative economy craves creativity, it also recognizes strong incentives to tame creativity. Creativity can be a most time- and capital-consuming activity. If we indulge it, it can eat up the entire support of the economy. In other words, although this late-capitalist economy relies heavily on creativity, creativity—as an unraveling of potentialities and unfamiliarity—is also a natural enemy of capitalism, whose principles are efficiency, productivity, and management. I believe this theory of “creativity loves constraints” is not only Google’s justification for exploiting its creative workers, but a dialectical demonstration of the threat of unrestrained creativity.

The dichotomization and intensification of intellectual and manual labor is manifested within not only creative agents like Miranda but also the creative class. We know that the creative class is composed of a hierarchy of workers ranked largely by their levels of creative inputs: there are glamorous designers who make key decisions, and there are also strata of “less creative” creative workers suffering from low job security and high
career risk. As we are reminded by critics, “‘Hot’ industries and ‘cool’ jobs not only normalize, they glamorize risk, and the entrepreneurial investment required of individuals seeking these jobs leads to a structural disincentive to exit during difficult economic times. The image of glamorized risk provides support for continued attacks on unionized work and for ever more market-driven, portfolio-based evaluations of workers’ value.”32 Such an illusion is clearly a result of the aura accorded the creative dimension of the creative class. In spite of the actual complex manifestation of creative labor, the glamour of creativity continues to prevent us from seeing the intimate relationship between industrial labor and creative labor, allowing the creative economy to privilege spontaneous creativity as being naturally more valuable than the labor required to change raw creativity into commodity, although it is the latter that really makes up the creative economy.

As a result, a radical subjectivism is retained, in the sense that creative energies supposedly emerge from a creator’s self-exploration, and the creator’s expressive power derives from imaginative depth. At the same time, creativity can now be planned, exercised, and executed by careful formulation and coordination, and it has become a collective product. The creative agent, then, is no longer an autonomous individual artist who exercises creativity for his or her own sake; nor does he or she follow rigid rules to perform his or her duties. But this agent combines both logics, maneuvering a diversified mode of thinking and training, in order to produce both creatively and industrially. Endowed with both the elite status of the artist and the consumption pattern of the leisure class, the popular imagination of creative workers effectively conceals their actual labor circumstances.

**The Democratization of Creativity**

In the logic of the creative economy, there is a dialectical relationship between creativity scarcity and creativity democracy. In order to justify their property status, intangible materials like ideas or creativity are understood to be exhaustible—as opposed to “nonrival”—so that activities related to sharing and copying can be delegitimized. Owners do not want to share their creative ideas with others because, as they claim, ideas could be exhausted through sharing and copying. It is believed that the value of a creative idea decreases with each successive reiteration.33 In order to apply the notion of exhaustion to creative ideas, these ideas must be understood in temporal terms: fashions come and go; creativity becomes a sparkle doomed to fade away. Increasingly, medical discourse has also been built upon concepts of competition: constantly mutating diseases and viruses continually make drugs obsolete. In addition to fetishizing newness, intellectual property rights (IPR) owners also
artificially create scarcity. In her analysis of film collecting in the VHS and DVD era, Barbara Klinger demonstrates that digitally reproduced films can never become rare. But in order to raise the desire for ownership among videotape or disc buyers, the language of scarcity (e.g., limited editions or rare items) permeates the discourse of video releases.34

Another most important strategy to conjure up the scarcity discourse of creativity is through the fetishization of creative labor. To return to the formulae analyzed earlier, the creative worker seems to be situated at the origin of the production process, which places him or her in a more privileged position than the industrial laborer, who is only a tool. The scarcity myth of creativity can only be maintained, in this age of creative economy, by the exalted position of the creative agent. In examining the digitalization of film culture, Michele Pierson asks to what extent special effects are still special if computer-generated imaging (CGI) effects are taken for granted in current Hollywood productions, and whether these so-called special effects only serve to meet the demand for photorealism.35 Pierson argues that a discourse of scarcity is still maintained, but in the sense that only a certain group of people—that is, Hollywood—can produce such images. The aesthetics of scarcity continues to dominate Hollywood’s fetishization of CGI, which produces the effect of impressing upon viewers that special effects are still special, and they are owned exclusively by Hollywood. While creative workers employed by Hollywood studios or related corporations are subject to the constraints of marketing strategies, company profiles, deadlines, and teamwork, the decoy of the “Hollywood” brand unifies them as the abstract author of commercial films, thus reifying the values of this creative class.36 The gay population is now being sought after by the notoriously conservative Singapore government on the assumption that gayness equals creative talent,37 and many formerly prosperous and up-and-coming American cities are also investing in cultural infrastructure to attract creative workers and (re)vitalize urban areas.38 In general, the creative economy justifies the scarcity of creativity by conjuring up the scarcity of the creative agent, in order to legitimize the discourse of creativity ownership.

However, the myth of the scarcity of creative workers is both contradicted and supported by the opposite discourse of creativity democratization. Responding to the rise of the creative economy, Florida articulates a new framework of the “creative class,” which is unified by the values of individuality and meritocracy, as well as the recognition of diversity and openness.39 Discarded seems to be the elitism embedded in the discourse of the genius, which limits the availability of the creative source. In this sense, Florida’s work contains a hidden tension in its formulation of the creative class, as he argues that creativity is both intrinsic to all and realized only selectively. Florida argues that creativity is a biologically and intellectually
innate characteristic in all human beings. He is most disturbed by the fact that only one-third of the workforce is employed in the creative sector, in which employees are often treated much better than those in the manufacturing sectors. So he advocates expansion of the creative class. I infer that Florida believes in the mutual reinforcement of the growth of creativity and the growth of economics, both of which have no limits. In other words, Florida uses a capitalist mindset of developmentalism to understand creativity. He argues that “the role of culture is much more expansive, that human beings have limitless potential, and that the key to economic growth is to enable and unleash that potential.” Although creativity is innate to all, in Florida’s self-contradictory discourse, which fetishizes something supposed to be universal, the capitalist framework requires that the competitive dimension of the creative economy be retained and further emphasized. For Florida, competition rests not in the discovery of individual geniuses, but in the democratization and intensification of creativity, so governments need to promote the teaching of “creativity,” and there should also be a more extensive merit system to reward the creative ones.

Since the rise of the creative economy, creativity can no longer belong to only a talented few, but must be democratized to expand the creative labor force. John Seabrook observes that as the mainstream has become ever more homogenous, the fringes have also become ever richer in cultural offerings, with an enormous increase in niche markets as well as “artists”: “Virtually everyone under twenty-five I met at MTV was an artist of one kind of another.” This phenomenon is reinforced by the IPR legal regime, which has also loosened the qualification of “authorship.” Jane Gaines observes:

All works of authorship are original. Why? Because they originate with authors . . . every work is an original work, regardless of whether it is aesthetically unoriginal, banal, or in some cases, imitative. Every individual person is also a potential “author” whose “writings” will be as “original” as those of a renowned or acclaimed literary figure. . . . Copyright’s minimal point of origin requirement, which considers light fixtures and belt buckles as “works of authorship,” performs a critique of traditional theory’s notion of authorial originality. Copyright law is a great cultural leveler.

As Gaines articulates, copyright’s loose demands on the qualification of authorship help democratize authorship, so that everybody can now be a writer or an artist in the legal sense. With various new production and distribution technologies available (cheap cameras and easy editing programs; YouTube and other online sites), everyone can make and exhibit moving images, dramatically increasing the number of legitimate video artists worldwide. While Gaines is right to point out the impact of this
cultural democracy on the traditional understanding of the artist, we cannot assume this “cultural leveler” will lead to a more egalitarian society. This democratization of creativity also supports current economic conditions, so that the proliferation of creativity, with the help of the legal protection of IPR, continues to fetishize the capitalist value of creativity, and the competition toward creativity only intensifies, as implied in Florida’s arguments.

The idea that everybody produces is not new to us, as the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies has demonstrated that consumption can be active and political; this is most easily observed in the ways that fans not only exchange and accumulate, but also poach and create. But the drastic democratization of art-production training and art-performing experience is an altogether different phenomenon, as creativity is not only democratized but also fetishized by our education system and popular culture, to the extent that each of us is fed the illusion that “I” am uniquely talented. Seemingly contradictory ideas of creativity — elitist and democratic — can also be found in today’s popular culture, in which fans think of their idols as gods. The structure of fan culture remains largely hierarchical: the audience reveres the artist. But the coexistence of different conceptions of creativity is more intertwined: although an artist may be so unique as to be worthy of mass worship, the worshippers themselves could one day be idols in their own right — as demonstrated by the global popularity of reality TV programs such as *American Idol*. In other words, the creative economy’s celebration of the democratization of creativity is manifested in the individual fan’s fantasy of being an idol. Such creative democracy does not demythologize notions of talent or deconstruct the associated hierarchy as the Birmingham School strives to do. It only reinforces competition and naturalizes the social ladder based on the myth that everyone is equal, so that the new logic of democracy is ideologically regressive to the Birmingham School’s celebration of reception.

The reification of creativity as a personal aptitude permeates not only discussions of creative labor but other, even oppositional, discourses. As Eva Hemmungs Wirtén rightly observes, a major problem of recent critical discourses against IPR expansion is the resurrection and reinvention of the author under names such as “hacker.” The hacker becomes just another romanticized form of artist, whose hacking exercises are considered his or her own personal productions and expressions of creativity and freedom. As a result, we continue to mythologize creativity, ignoring the actual labor involved. Although Florida introduces the concept of class to address the collectivity of creative labor, he essentializes the supremacy of creative labor over other forms of labor. We should be reminded that “class” is a highly constructed concept; it is not simply a structural category based on the nature of property ownership, but is always politically
and ideologically constructed. Using the notion of class, therefore, should require constant reflection on power. But the way the creative class is understood and politicized in the current creative economy is grounded on the assumption that creativity is the natural property or immanent capability of a selected group, or “aristocracy.” If we are to hold onto the collective notion of “class” to understand the new creative labor, we must also be alert to various contrived ideological matters related to identification and representation, which Florida simply casts aside.

By incorporating culture into economy, economy must take human dimensions into account, and there are inevitable tensions between the two logics that might result in a variety of consequences. It is true that creative labor might introduce noncapitalist economic notions of collaborative networks and creative ecologies. As some scholars argue, the community of creative workers might generate a collective resource, which exists independently of capital, “providing a mezzo-level structural defence for autonomous artistic labour, and a politics of autonomy within and beyond the commodified cultural sector.” Some other scholars have also emphasized that the intimate entanglements between creativity and economy in current society actually provide opportunities to develop working communities in which economic activities are subordinated to wider social and cultural imperatives, so that economy can no longer afford to be blind to human affect and social relationships.

However, there is also the danger of romanticizing the exercise of creativity as liberation, which also runs the risks of idealizing the working environment and ideological limitations associated with this form of labor. The exaltation of “taste” and “beauty,” for example, can be extremely intellectually constraining, and such sensational appeals also make the works readily available to be appropriated by different political interests. In discussing the role of a photographer in the age of commodification, Walter Benjamin argues that the photographer easily becomes “illiterate,” unable to read his own pictures because his production of the “beautiful” prevents him from seeing the political content captured in his own pictures. Being lured into the production of the beautiful and the capitulation to fashion, the photographer can never discover the full meaning of his own work. In a period characterized by aestheticization, Benjamin believes that people are too paralyzed by the “beautiful” to use critical thinking to discern social ramifications. He praises photographers of an earlier generation, such as Atget, who was able to turn his photographed space into a crime scene: “Isn’t it the task of the photographer — descendant of the augurs and haruspices — to reveal guilt and to point out the guilty in his pictures?” However, the photographer, who had been able to reveal to us the optical unconscious in the nineteenth century, increasingly serves the status quo by producing “the beautiful world.” The
“creative” therefore covers up political maneuvering. Benjamin claims: “The more far-reaching the crisis of the present social order, and the more rigidly its individual components are locked together in their death struggle, the more the creative in its deepest essence a variant (contradiction its father, imitation its mother) — becomes a fetish, whose lineaments live only in the fitful illumination of changing fashion.”50 The crisis Benjamin refers to here is certainly Fascism, but I think his insights can also help us understand our present situation. In the above passage, Benjamin uses the term creative pejoratively, as he equates the creative to the production of the beautiful, and therefore to insensitivity to any other form of knowledge. He argues that because current photographers no longer manifest the physiognomic, political, and scientific interests shown among earlier generations of photographers, the photographs produced become “creative.”51 In general, Benjamin believes that photographers must be driven by the desire for engagement with the world, instead of indulging in “creative” activities to legitimize their indifference. As the earliest generation of photographers shows, social engagement and craving for knowledge could be manifested in many different forms — only through the submission of one’s creative efforts to other social pursuits could the photograph be enlightened and captivating.

Benjamin reminds us to avoid equating the creative with the aesthetic, which might uncritically endorse the transcendental discourse of the artist. It might essentialize one’s ownership of one’s work and dissociate the work from its social embedding. The creative economy employs the “creative” in exactly the way Benjamin criticizes. In order to carry on Benjamin’s critique, our task is not to brush aside the materiality of creative productions altogether and to consider them ideologically regressive, but to take creative labor more seriously and understand it as a site of contestation. Creative labor is informed by both the logic of modernist art and the logic of capitalism, and this new form of labor is equipped with a wide array of aptitudes and values. At the same time, it is also under a broader spectrum of pressure and exploitation.

Marx conceptualizes labor (not labor-power) in the sense that labor is a basic condition of human existence, and it mediates the relation between man and nature, and therefore human life itself.52 Marx believes that human relations are largely defined by people’s labor and the socio-political structures that instigate it. Instead of emphasizing the personal nature of labor as John Locke does, Marx stresses the social relations labor elicits. Through labor people enter into definite social relations with each other — whether positively as members of the same community; or negatively, propelled by capitalism, as slave or master, lord or serf, or capitalist or wage earner.53

But it does not mean we should essentialize labor, as evidenced in
certain Marxist tendencies to equate certain types of labor to revolution. In his studies of the intercourse between students and factory workers in nineteenth-century France, Jacques Rancière demonstrates the mutual desire of the two groups for the liberating possibilities inherent in the others’ material labor situations. The confrontation of two different kinds of “workers” and different modes of production could point out the deficiencies and repressions in the different sets of social and subjective conditions, providing both of these groups a new perspective from which to understand desperation, social unrest, and revolution. Within a Marxist framework, Rancière seeks to reconceptualize the actual political meanings of industrial laborers, who have been considered the only people who could lead society to revolution: it was not the nature of their labor or material hardship, but their predetermined quality of life, which was the real source of agitation. By the same token, Rancière also “rescues” the notion of intellectual production from the damnation of orthodox Marxists as nothing but “false ideology.” Most important, he demonstrates that the confrontation between different forms of labor is politically productive, as such confrontations often help to denaturalize the working environment one is too mired in to see beyond.

As such, the simultaneous embodiment of artistic and industrial logics in creative labor is potentially revolutionary, as we can see the value of creative labor in its ability to bring to crisis the inherent limitations of both logics. Instead of following Florida’s uncritical celebration of creative labor, we might choose to complicate the constituents of creative labor and see such complexity as politically confounding because it constantly incorporates and interjects different kinds of labor and different ways of thinking, although it also means that workers are exposed to exploitation on different fronts. The creative economy seems to have provided the infrastructure to realize the democracy of creativity, which allegedly addresses the innate creative ability of all people and promises to provide enough incentives and training to allow all individuals to turn their innate creative ability not only into means of self-realization but also forms of cultural capital. But the myth that everybody can be creative uncritically endorses only the superiority of creative labor over other forms of labor, fulfilling the human-centered modernity project in a different way. Instead, if we can discern the complex social embedding of creative labor, we will not fetishize creative labor as a “higher” form of labor, but understand that it actually embodies the site where contradictions of late capitalism operate. Labor does not evaporate in the creative economy, but it is only more intricately shaped to accommodate to and justify a condensed and twisted economic logic.
Notes

I am grateful to the pertinent questions and suggestions raised by the blind reviewers of Social Text. I am also indebted to Arif Dirlik, whose comments on the previous draft of this essay are significant to my revision.

1. By creative economy I mean an economy driven mainly by the input of new ideas. The notion of creative economy, therefore, complements the knowledge economy or information society, but creative economy implies more clearly the manipulation of creativity. Simply speaking, the term creative economy should illustrate the mutual conditioning between the culture and economy of late capitalism.


3. Ibid., 146–47.


5. Ibid.

6. Bjørn Asheim and Eric Clark argue that the “new economy” is characterized by competitions built on innovation and differentiation strategies, as opposed to previous competitions that were based on price competition. See “Creativity and Cost in Urban and Regional Development in the ‘New Economy,’” European Planning Studies 9, no. 7 (2001): 806. However, I believe that this “new economy” comprises both components and, in fact, their continual intensification.


12. The vigorous Dutch art market was originally more commodity market than art market; in the early seventeenth century people paid standard prices for pictures according to their subjects, rather than their artists. New marketing strategies were introduced toward the end of the century to respond to the saturation of the mass-produced portrait market, and there developed a new discourse of master artists, and discerning individuals also evolved a taste for finely crafted paintings. See Michael North, *Art and Commerce in the Dutch Golden Age* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 82–105.


15. Christopherson, “The Divergent Worlds of New Media.”

16. See, for example, Geert Lovink and Mieke Gerritzen, eds., *Everyone Is a Designer: Manifest for the Design Economy* (Amsterdam: Bis, 2001).


19. Ibid., 312.

20. Ibid., 289.

21. Ibid., 290.

22. Ibid., 579.


33. Here lies a major quandary of the current copyright debates: Should ideas be protected? A major principle of copyright discourse is the dichotomy of ideas and
expressions: although expressions should be protected, ideas should not, because ideas belong to the entire human race. However, many recent cases demonstrate that ideas are now protected, although not entirely via copyright but by many other kinds of contract and business laws.


36. However, there are also strategic moments when IPR owners highlight the material conditions of the actual hierarchy of creative workers. Governmental or corporate antipiracy campaigns often exploit the notion and the interests of the creative worker to criminalize piracy. In Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) campaigns through television commercials, movie trailers, and the Internet, the unauthorized reproduction and distribution of movies is portrayed as a threat to the livelihoods of people working in the film industry—not famous stars or directors but the actual workers. See Kelly Gates, “Will Work for Copyrights: The Cultural Policy of Anti-Piracy Campaigns,” Social Semiotics 16 (2006): 57–73.


41. Ibid., 5.

42. John Seabrook, Nobrow: The Culture of Marketing, the Marketing of Culture (New York: Knopf, 2000), 72.


49. Ibid.

50. Ibid., 526.
51. Ibid.
52. Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, 133.