



On the new dignity of labour

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abstract

In the first half of this paper I situate the contemporary discourse of 'creative' labour, of which digital labour is regarded as the epitomising symbol, within the historical discourse on the dignity of labour. One of the conditions of possibility of this discourse is to be located in the prevailing conception of social class. Although class position cannot be defined exclusively by occupation, under conditions of precarity or 'liquid modernity', occupation has increasingly assumed the role of a key determinant of social and economic and inequality. In the second half of the paper, I provide a brief overview of the history of work as a dignified and dignifying activity. This historical contextualisation is followed by the argument that judgments about the skill status of a particular occupation are at base judgments about the moral qualities of different categories of workers and ultimately the individuals placed in such categories. I identify three figurations of work in the Western economies – the ergometric, fractal and modular – and locate digital labour within this moral cascade of job types. The article concludes with suggestions about the utopian and dystopian resonances of digital labour in relation to the concept of collective labour and the neo-liberal ideology of self-appreciating labour.

Introduction

Contemporary commentary on class as a determining factor in social and political life are grappling with an enigma. As economic and social inequality reaches stratospheric levels globally, class seems less relevant as a way of understanding identity and social relationships (Domhoff, 2008; Evans and Evans, 1995; Hout et al., 1993; Scott, 2002). The appearance of a disconnect between class structure and class-consciousness is, of course, a perennial problem in Western Marxism (Anderson, 1975). Hence the existence of a vast literature that attempts to explain the relative absence of a revolutionary working class movement especially in advanced capitalist economies of Western Europe and the USA. Such an absence has persisted, through boom times and slump, despite the presence of a distinctive set of working class institutions, such as trades' unions, co-operative organizations and working class communities assembled around primary industries such as mining, steel production, and automobile production. The decline of the latter through de-industrialisation and off-shoring is clearly a present factor, but even when such industries were at their height, the forces of solidarity turned inward rather than outward. The economic realities that determined class existence, for the most part, conspicuously failed to eventuate in a full-blown class-conscious solidarity, seemingly content to meander along the by-ways of class awareness, a self-contained existence within but not against capitalism (Hobsbawm, 1984: 14-32). Nor

can it be denied that one of the historical legacies of the 1980's is a retreat from class by Marxism itself, with other forms of inequality, and other political entities such as the 'people' being pushed forward as providing a more appropriate agency of change (Wood, 1986). In the technical literature of social theory and sociology, such trends have been matched by a more rigorous formulation of concepts like exploitation and the relationship between status inequality, occupation and class capitalism (Wright, 1996).

It is not my intention to pronounce on these complex issues here. Rather I will note that contemporary accounts of class refer to it as less of a political process than a matter of culture. An increasing number of intervening variables have been uncovered by empirical research: the weakening of the division between mental and manual labour within organisational culture, the unequal effects of occupational closure, inequalities in the social, economic and cultural assets of different families, the impact of consumerism, and the role of taste in classification struggles over the definition of personal worth and respectability (Goldthorpe and Marshall, 1992; Grusky and Weedon, 2005; Savage et al., 2005; Skeggs, 2005). Once again, the arbitration of these various claims is a matter for specialists. What is evident is that unlike the claims of post-class or post-politics theorists, sociological class analysis is also in the same gradient of descent from the traditional identification of class with a national structure of wealth and income towards the micro-frameworks of inequality. Such fine-tuning of facets of inequality is to be welcomed. But there is a danger that in the refinement of measures, the contribution of class to such processes gets pluralised out of existence. So it has been suggested that the microstructures of association, the circle of friends, the local network or the kin group are the drivers of inequality. Sequestered from the impress of collective life, such groups generate their own hierarchies and discriminatory boundaries in order to maintain their position and cohesion in relation to outsiders. In this manner, ever more finely and locally grained forms of discrimination emerge from the locality and are a result, not of economic factors or collectively based world-views, but of the principle of hierarchy as an anthropological constant (Bottero, 2004; Devine, 1998). What is entertained here, even unintentionally, is a variety of the 'death of class' thesis with the structural aspects of class undergoing morselization and confinement, in a Foucauldian sense, to the realm of immediate or individual experience. For what I shall dub class morselization theorists, class inequality remains a fact but it has 'lost' its traditional mediations possibly under the influence of neoliberalism (Compton, 1996; Webb, 2004).

Although it is not made explicit, class morselization theories bear a family resemblance to a structuration model (Giddens, 1973). In this model, the causal intensity of other forms of (ascribed) inequality – gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, nationality – varies in relation to the class position of the individuals and groups who are the bearers/inheritors of the markers of difference. Thus, for example, the historically generated stereotypes attached to being black or female (or both together) will have a greater or lesser impact depending on the socio-economic (class) position of the individuals concerned. Socio-economic class is therefore a necessary but not sufficient condition (or as Giddens describes it, a mediate rather than proximate cause) for social inequality. Individuals as the differentially positioned inheritors of historically specific identities are located in particular contexts of interaction – markets, hierarchies, and networks – that facilitate or inhibit the development of individual opportunities to

affirm or overturn their original identity endowments. How this process works creates a form of life, which, if limited by class, filters the process of class structuration through the social and cultural texture of lived experience. How class impacts a particular individual, or for that matter a group of individuals, depends accordingly on the ongoing alignment of an individual's life course to the social texture he or she inherited from the past and encounters in the present (Eder, 1993).

Having identified the configuration of current debates over the nature and geometry of class, I now want to focus on my main theme: how the development of 'digital' capitalism is reconfiguring class relationships at the point of production. A conventional answer is that digital capitalism is transforming the occupational structure. But the transformation of occupations is proceeding at a slower pace than that predicted by end-of-work theorists such as Jeremy Rifkin (Rifkin, 1995). Prior to the banking crisis at least, long term employment was not declining in Europe and the USA, though it is being redistributed across the occupational order so that the conditions of employment such as wages, hours of work, job security and benefits are worsening (Auer and Cazes, 2000; Doogan, 2005; Kalleberg, 2008; Nolan and Slater, 2010). The probable reason for the widespread belief in a 'workless' society is that restructuring is hitting categories of jobs that have historically been protected from shifts in technology and the labour market. In the USA, for example, since the 1990s, employment has been growing at the top and the bottom of the occupational scale with a squeeze on growth in middle-range occupations (Autor, Levy and Murnane, 2003).

But below the macro-level of analysis, the perception of the value of labour is shifting, with growing prominence accorded to the creative capacities of digital labour. From a structural perspective, even with the transformative powers of digital technology, we are not moving into a post-capitalist age. The fundamental property relationships that underpin the class structure remain intact and have sharply intensified (May, 2006). Acknowledging that an objective shift is not occurring does not mean that the perception of a shift is not doing an important ideological service. Digital labour is a new chapter in the moral history of the concept of work that links technological advances to the concept of work as expressive play. The close linkage of the development of digital technologies with the realm of entertainment and play is obviously an important ingredient in this evocation – not withstanding the tendency for digital play to be commodified, as with the phenomenon of 'gold farmers' who develop the capacities of avatars for sale (Yee, 2006; Dibbell, 2007). But rather than address the question of play, my emphasis is on digital labour as an image of work that reframes mundane labour as a positive or 'cool' experience. At the level of representation, then, the question of the transformation of work is inescapably a question about the value ascribed to different kinds of occupations, to work and, in the final analysis, to workers.

Class as closure

A recent theme in the study of stratification points to 'access to occupation' as the key point of articulation of class inequality. To some extent this emphasis continues an old tradition of equating class with occupation, but it goes further, postulating that contemporary class societies are marked by a process of individualization in which

social reference units, such as the family or the community, no longer offer effective support to the individual in framing his or her life course. The process of locating the self in a narrative becomes dependent on the market as a site of consumption and, prior to that, the earnings and benefits provided by an individual's engagement with the labour market (Beck, 2004: 127-138). An important mediator of class formation, then, is the occupational structure and an individual's place in it, such a place determining income and the social worth of the individual. One approach to the occupations is to see them, much like medieval guilds, as instruments for social closure, a conception that ultimately departs from a class analysis (Grusky and Weedon, 2001).

A better approach is to treat occupations as the point of access through which individuals are placed, empowered or disempowered, in respect to the existing scheme of social and cultural inequalities (Goldthorpe and Marshall, 1992). In this approach, class formation is determined by the interaction between a vanishing mediator – the representational servant of social change between capitalist and post-capitalist productive relationships – accomplishing the magical supersession of class. Through the concept of dignity, ideas about the intrinsic worth of the individual have been decoupled from the structural realities of class. This is not to assert that calls for dignity are mere apologetics for capitalism, as the movement for decent labour indicates (Sen, 2000). But my focus is on the regressive rather than progressive features of dignity, not the least because digital labour is rosily represented as the most dignified labour. Digital labour, in my view, involves the parcelling out of moral worth to different kinds of labour. In this way, class determination becomes a discursive method for fixing the moral worth of different 'kinds' of persons (Sayer, 2005). But class determination is not the only fixing process; consumption as an apparent realm of self-expression, if not redemption, is just as consequential if not more so (Campbell, 1989; Doherty, 2009).

On dignity

In the kingdom of ends everything has either value or dignity. Whatever has a value can be replaced by something else, which is equivalent; whatever, on the other hand, is above all value, and therefore admits of no equivalent, has a dignity... Whatever has reference to the general inclinations and wants of mankind has a market value; whatever, without presupposing a want, corresponds to a certain taste, that is to a satisfaction in the mere purposeless play of our faculties, has a fancy value; but that which constitutes the condition under which alone anything can be an end in itself, this has not merely a relative worth, i.e., value, but an intrinsic worth, that is, dignity. (Kant, 1785)

Writing at a time and in a country where pre-capitalist forms were still prevalent, Kant presents dignity as a moral absolute defined against the exchange relationships typical of a newly burgeoning capitalism. The forms of relative value – relative as a means to a particular end, such as the selling of labour power and 'the exercise of wit and imagination' – are cast as compromises to human dignity, which resides in the realm of ends in themselves.¹ Defining dignity as inalienable offers a moral buttress against

1 Fancy value as an intermediate state between the realm of ends and the realm of means strikes an odd note today given the pervasive development of commercialised entertainments – though it has a certain critical traction as a shadowy emblem of use value.

capitalist relations of production. Kant's statement can be seen as a resume of current thinking about the relationship between work and dignity under capitalism. However, there are some serious limitations to it.

Taking Kant literally means that dignity becomes a luxury afforded only to those who are not obliged to take their skills to the market. Moreover, Kant connects dignity to mental rather than physical or manual labour. The latter, echoing an age-long tradition of viewing work as Adam's curse, is defined as undignified. Adam Smith, Kant's near contemporary, in his discussion of productive and unproductive labour, is more forthright in addressing capitalism as a context:

The labour of some of the most respectable orders in the society is, like that of menial servants, unproductive of any value... The sovereign, for example, with all the officers both of justice and war who serve under him... are unproductive labourers... Their service, how honourable, how useful, or how necessary soever, produces nothing for which an equal quantity of service can afterwards be procured. (Smith, 1776: 265)

In the class of unproductive labour are found: 'some both of the gravest and most important, and some of the most frivolous professions: churchmen, lawyers, physicians, men of letters of all kinds: players, buffoons, opera singers, opera dancers, etc.' (Smith, 1776: loc cit).

In distinguishing between productive labour that creates surplus value for the capitalist and unproductive labour paid for out of revenue, Smith recognizes a fundamental opposition posed by capitalist productive relationships between economic and moral worth. As the terms he deploys – 'however honourable', 'gravest', 'most important', 'useful', 'necessary', 'frivolous' – suggest, unproductive labour from a financial point of view can nonetheless evoke other conceptions of value. Kant's absolute denial of dignity to paid work is in Smith's argument replaced by a calculus of utility – productive for capital, socially productive, productive to the worker and so on. But for all its failure to engage capitalism as a reality, defining dignity as Kant does, as an end in itself, provides a benchmark against which to interrogate how human worth sustains itself when faced with the systematic compromises resulting from the sale of labour power as a commodity.

The insistence on work as an end in itself is echoed in a tradition that views work as a species-defining activity (Sayers, 2005). Marx, drawing on Hegel, analyses the diverse ways in which the social relations of capitalist production developed, and then thwarted, the potential of work to lead to the full development of the individual; such potential rests, in turn, on the development of the direct producers' collective self-organisation through the phases of socialism and then communism (Sayer, 2005). In England in the 1840-50s, William Morris, drawing on the more radical aspects of Ruskin's arguments about art as the epitome of work as self-realisation, made the strongest popular case against the hedonistic equation of work with pain, distinguishing between useful toil and drudgery (Dart, 1999). A 'producerist' tradition of the Gospel of Work saw manual labour as the source of wealth. Independent or self-employed artisans were seen as possessing a moral and religious superiority over the idle rich and the managerial servants of capitalism. No less a figure than Abraham Lincoln, in his annual message to Congress in 1861, defined capital as nothing more than the fruits of labour. For those

workers newly entering capitalist relations of production, dignity depended on controlling the labour process and the empowerment provided by labour unions or other forms of craft association.

Mercantilism, classical liberalism and neo-liberalism codified work as a curse, a 'disutility' to be endured in order to survive, and as a patriotic duty. Adam Smith emphasized the soul-numbing impact of the division of labour and saw work as fundamentally 'toil and trouble' (Spencer, 2010: 42). Bentham, who saw hedonism as the primary motive for human behaviour, sharpened this emphasis; work was only useful because it provided the means to enjoy the pursuits of leisure (Spencer, 2010; White, 1979).

The development of Scientific Management and, subsequently 'high waged' Fordist practices, sought to place the labour process under the direct control of capitalism (Gutman, 1977; Montgomery, 1989). As these practices, valorised by the Gospel of Wealth, became hegemonic, the values of the Gospel of Work became a counterpoint to the daily struggles for dignity in the workplace (Durrenberger and Doukas, 2008). The discursive struggle for hegemony between these two doctrines is ongoing and eternally recurrent within capitalist social relations of production. As a recent ethnographic study of work observes:

Life demands dignity and meaningful work is essential for dignity. Dignity is the ability to establish a sense of self-worth and self-respect and to appreciate the respect of others working with dignity requires purposive, considered and creative efforts on part of workers as they confront workplaces that deny dignity and infringe on well being. (Hodson, 2001: 3)

Practically, workplace dignity rests on a dynamic supportive relationship between the individual worker and collective organisations; the latter includes political associations advancing democratic demands, and labour organisations that seek to secure conditions of employment and a living wage. Dignity also inheres as a pervasive informal force within the workplace through:

[C]ountless small acts of resistance against abuse and a strong drive to take pride in one's daily work ...Much of the daily battle for dignity at work is waged by individual workers and small groups of workers against managers and supervisors and also against other employees and groups of employees... these struggles highly symbolic in nature, with gossip and character assassination playing central roles. (Hodson, op.cit. 264-265)

The new kinds of work: Digital labour

A feature of the historical framing of work has been its equation with manual labour, which could be seen as either as a barrier to, or a means towards the realisation of dignity (Kelly, 2000). Manual labour has been the historically accepted badge of the proletariat, primarily carried out by males. By contrast, middle-class identity has been associated with mental labour and levels of education, culture and taste that spared their possessor from onerous work. Once again, the capacity for mental labour power, even within the middle class, is imagined as primarily a male characteristic.

What is notable about the depiction of work from the onset of the current century is that the benchmark of intrinsically good work has become knowledge-intensive mental labour – particularly when information technologies are involved, in other words, digital labour. Manual workers are less likely to value work for its intrinsic qualities compared to non-manual workers. This difference might be a realistic appraisal of the quality of work encountered by manual workers. If a tight focus is maintained on those who are employed – as opposed to self-employed craft workers or in a different value set, proprietors – then good work, work that affords dignity, is a perquisite of white-collar employment (Svallfors, 2006).²

A general endorsement of this equation of good work with mental labour can be found in contemporary cultural representations of work, specifically in the popularity of television forensic melodramas. Network series such as CSI, and its clones, Bones, House and in Britain, Waking The Dead, and Silent Witness celebrate work as a team engagement in a knowledge-intensive process, driven by specific projects or cases. Emotional labour is an important element in the plot, but always as a barrier to be surmounted in the pursuit of an intellectually satisfying and legally sound solution. Police procedural dramas that once, in movies such as Someone to Watch Over Me, the Dirty Harry series or television shows such Hill Street Blues, explored the conflicts and contradictions between legality, morality, class resentment and working class authoritarianism have been sidelined (Aronowitz, 1992). Today's dramas prioritise reflection and deliberation over decisiveness and action. They feature sleek, well-educated professionals as protagonists who confront the world of crime and criminals, to say nothing of the general public with the cognitive authority of science.

Another feature of the foregrounding of objectivity within current popular representations of work is the trans-valuation of gender stereotypes. Here is a working world populated with emotive males and coolly rational females, dedicated puzzle-solvers applying the impeccable authority of forensic science and causing unrealistic expectations of the standards of proof (Cavender and Deutsch, 2007) Even in shows such as The Sopranos or Mad Men, traditional stereotypes, seemingly deployed for historical and social plausibility, become ironic devices revealing 'atypical' resources of intelligence and cunning or unexpected weaknesses. Similar switches are apparent with racial stereotypes, of which The Wire is an outstanding example. Compared to the solidity of the world of Archie Bunker³, today's popular sitcoms such as Malcolm in the Middle, My Name is Earl and Everybody Hates Chris depict working class life as a constant but inept struggle to replace boring and insecure work with the excitements of consumerism or petty crime. Such déclassé scenarios, hovering on the edge of poverty and social disintegration, evoke the world of knowledge intensive work as a better and more dignified prospect. Here the lessons of good motivation and high performance, take their place alongside those contemporary hymns to the performance principle:

2 Though as Hodson notes from his survey craft workers are generally better organised to defend job quality in the work place, professional workers tend accede to management's demands for increasing work intensity in exchange for job security.

3 For a survey of the history of media depiction of the American working class depiction see Bustch (1995) and Kendall (2005).

reality television shows and talent contests, where contestants struggle to manifest the small differences of talent and commitment that can translate into winning (Kjus, 2009).

A thorough mapping of the contemporary media representations of class is too complex a task to shoulder here. But I want to note that even popular culture representations are celebrating the creativity of labour. This celebration also finds a forthright expression amongst management gurus, the foremost of these being Richard Florida. In his hands, creative labour has become the foundation of a new class order: 'Essentially my theory says that regional economic growth is driven by the location choices of creative people – the holders of creative capital – who prefer places that are diverse, tolerant and open to new ideas' (Florida, 2002: 223).

Urban cosmopolitans are the key to economic success. They are the historic agency that presents Capital with its determinant negation because creativity is a property that workers own, that cannot be taken from them. Even without collective organisation, workers in the knowledge economy are collectively – and, it is implied, individually – indispensable (Florida, 2002: 37). If Florida celebrates the power of labour, he has little to say about the power of Capital; downsizing, outsourcing, CEO remuneration, leveraged buy-outs, and the like are treated as facts of nature to which workers must respond creatively.

The crux of Florida's appeal rests on a democratic acknowledgement that specialised workers have knowledge vital to wealth creation. Accordingly, management faces the problem of retaining a resource that is within, but not of, the company (Luque, 2001). Such specialist workers are able to negotiate service contracts that provide for a more autonomous relationship to the work place, higher salary, fringe benefits and a commitment to a relatively extended term of employment. But they must be distinguished from more numerous routine employees whose conditions are regulated by a labour contract, which treats them as units of labour power to be paced and closely supervised, and offers few or no benefits, nor a commitment to continuous employment. The general climate of re-commodification, where fewer of life's necessities are protected from the action of the market, affects all employees, but workers on labour contracts especially (Breen, 1997).

What Florida is articulating is a new hegemonic conception of labour power. This imagery is both celebratory – labour is inherently creative – and divisive, because 'creatives' are seeking, in the pursuit of excellence and a unique vision, the right to be unequal. The claims of new class structure in which access or knowledge rather than property are the levers of power are certainly exaggerated. On the one hand, cross-national data on employment patterns indicate that long-term job tenure and stability are the norm, even for routine blue- and white-collar work. Labour markets far from becoming unstructured or fluid, remain segmented between a relatively stable core and a much less stable periphery, which functions like a revolving door in and out of the labour market. What is particularly salient is that for young workers, the transition from the hyper-flexible periphery to the core of at least semi-permanent jobs is becoming more difficult to achieve and, if occurring, is a more protracted process (Rosas and Rossignotti, 2005).

If the ‘end of work’ thesis is exaggerated, neo-liberal cuts, de-industrialisation, the decline of organised labour unions and the ongoing fiscal crisis mean that all ranks of workers face increasing uncertainty and here, media reporting of job losses, particularly amongst previously viewed as secure white collar workers, have fuelled anxieties (Fevre, 2007).⁴

The general perception of job insecurity is impacting the workplace with employees reporting lower levels of job satisfaction and commitment to organisational objectives, and a heightened preparedness to seek alternative employment – the psychological correlate of churn (Sora, Caballer and Peiro, 2010). In these circumstances, it is not surprising that knowledge-intensive jobs come to epitomise ‘good work’. Such jobs are better paid and more likely to be located in the core, where employment is stable and work is flexible compared to the multitudinous periphery, where workers are flexible and employment precarious. Jobs in the media, the performing arts and fashion, because they are project-based, have the prestige of creativity and innovation and a glamorous proximity to cultural entrepreneurs and above-line creative workers. Influential texts have popularised have equated intrinsically satisfying work and the performing arts, and celebrity culture has popularised the notion that success can be attained through nifty self-fashioning (Pine and Gilmour, 1999). This equation of ‘good work’ with psychological and physical compliance signals the management of personality as an exchange value, an alienable façade distinguished from the hidden and more capacious uses of the self.

However, the conjuration of cultural work as intrinsically creative underplays the fact that significant elements of such work involve bodily labour in the production of ‘immaterial’ services – as the paradigm occupations of modelling and performing clearly demonstrate. Obviously enough, food industry and retail workers do routine unskilled and semi-skilled manual work, and for every shoe designer, there is a platoon of factory operatives churning out down-market copies and sales assistants selling them. So, too, jobs that are primarily focused on serving the needs of clients are less expressive than emotionally prescriptive, requiring daily emotional labour: ‘the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display’ (Hochschild, 1983: 7). But arguably the most significant misrepresentation driving ‘creative labour’ is the idea of ‘inherent’ talent, which tends to obscure the fact that such labour is highly dependent on the possession of appropriate technology at the best level of development and the capital to exploit it (Bilton, 2007: 72-74). Digital labour is the apogee of such a dependency.

The very modern good work imaginary

Following earlier work, I name these jobs, in a descending order of expressive latitude, modular, fractal and ergometric jobs (King, 2007). These kinds of jobs cut across the distinction between service and labour contracts because their expectations can be applied to all employees, full time, part-time and subcontracted:

4 Though the actual decline of manual labour in Western economies is less precipitous than imagined, much manual labour has of course migrated to the developing countries.

(a) Modular jobs – employees selected on the basis of specific skill sets – writer, illustrator, designer, producer, director, animator, etc. – and psychological profile. Given that there is likely to be an excess of candidates with an appropriate skill set, personality factors are paramount. In order to gain and stay in employment, workers are required to supplement their focussed expertise with ‘deep’ acting skills, self-managing their emotions to fit in with a work process marked by deadlines and time sensitive projects. Balancing deadlines and long-term relationship work, these workers also engage (in and out of work) in compulsory networking. The dramaturgical metaphor fits this environment because, like actors, workers assume characters that are distinct from their veridical selves, which may be a source of discrepant information about their commitment. This kind of job is modular because there is an element of autonomy in the styling of the work, the phasing and pacing of delivery and self-presentation, with resources of irony, reflexivity and humour deployed as tension management. Although the public may be the final recipient of the service provided, the proximate clients are other professionals within and outside the organization (Rose, 1989).

Even if attention is narrowed to encompass only skill-intensive positions, it is doubtful that these permit, because of their intrinsic properties, the unlicensed exercise of creativity. Such a capacity remains the prerogative of ownership. The much-touted notion of the project team engaged in producing cultural commodities is much more problematic than it appears. Teamwork in corporate settings can be coercive and controlling, demanding of high levels of psychological and physical conformity. What begins as an ideal (let’s be creative!) rapidly mutates into a performance principle – show creativity or else! (Barker, 1993; McCann, et.al. 2008). Nor is it clear that notions of human resource management (HRM), with their litany of job enrichment and high performance work systems (HPWS), is deliverable within a system of capitalist corporate governance (Thompson, 2005; Christopherson, 2008).

Modular jobs are presented as the handmaidens of creative freedom, equated with information work per se, despite the fact that the expansion in knowledge work is concentrated in routine service work where jobs are fractal rather than modular (Fleming et al., 2004; Royle, 2010; Thompson et al., 2001). But even if this equation were taken at face value, modular workers are increasingly exposed to corporate or market failures and expected to accept the entrepreneurial risks once assumed by the corporation. In addition, such workers are required to work long hours, donating free labour and lower wages in order to establish a track record. What autonomy they achieve is often at the cost of self-exploitation and of being flexible to the point of dispensability. Despite these immediate experiences they are likely to entertain an uncritical belief in media representations of the ‘cool’ jobs they occupy, perhaps because other jobs are no better and perhaps worse (Neff et al., 2005; Ross, 2008; Terranova, 2000). Modular jobs are relationship jobs in which solicitation of collaboration, brainstorming, aesthetic appreciation and design intelligence are prioritised. The management of such jobs is a balancing act between release and control of the ‘creative’ impulse (Bilton, 2007).

(b) Fractal jobs – labour contract jobs in which skill levels are low and personality requirements are de-individualised and focussed on conformity. In line with geometric terminology, fractality is a condition of self-similarity in which sub-units are identical

and exact miniatures of a totality or rather, since we are dealing with people, are expected to be. Individual employees are functionally organised by management to be interchangeable. The fractal jobholder is required to project a rigidly scripted personality: a standard uniform, a prescribed demeanour, and a specific interactive script for dealing with customers (Ritzer, 1996). This mode of regulation is emotional labour, involving surface conformity or 'shallow' acting (Hochschild, 1983).⁵ The fractal job has as its axial principle the standardisation of a service or a service relationship. Such jobs, identified as McJobs, are widely perceived as being low skill, low pay jobs with few career prospects.

(c) A third kind of job is the ergometric job, very much the offspring of the subsumption of work to capitalist direction. Not lauded as creative, this kind of job covers wage-labour contract jobs, which are low-skilled and where a rising level of output is key priority. In such jobs the personality of the worker is irrelevant or rather, bears a positive or negative zero sum relationship to output. The requirement that such jobs 'bypass' personality is signalled by terms such as hands, muscle and so on. Once, the notion of dignified labour rested on the simple fact of doing a day's work and earning wages. As Henry Ford put it: 'For the day's work is a great thing- a very great thing! It is the very foundation of the world; it is the basis of our self respect' (quoted in Thomas, 1999: 166). The ergometric job is externally paced or extrinsically motivated, either by machines, by piece rates or by time study, and is associated with close supervision. Ergometric labour may be entangled with intangible commodity production such as consumer electronics, CDs and DVDs, fashion wear, shoes, etc. – but essentially, the work process entails the manipulation of matter. In the lexicon of 'creativity', ergometric work is bad work.

While these descriptions might seem simply to be fancy names for skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled work, this would miss the fact that skill is an aspect of all work. The central question is whether this is recognised or disregarded in the social relations of the workplace. In other words, these are ideal types, rather than empirical descriptions, that describe the moral worth or dignity of the worker rather than the content of the job. As one study observed: 'We found that knowledge workers were distributed across all occupational groups. This finding provided support for those who have argued that the growth in knowledge work cannot be measured by occupational changes' (Benson and Brown, 2007).

The superior conditions of the modular job mark the superior worker, despite the fact that empirically a fractally regulated employee may exercise a margin of creativity and a modularly regulated employee, dull conformity. Moreover, moral evaluation is nested within the work order of 'cool' jobs. In the case of fashion for example, good work, or high-end autonomous work is the province of fashion models and editors. Below this elite core is a periphery of catalogue editors and 'part models' (car models and 'part' models valued for their hands, hair, thighs, etc.) and, further removed from these, are the humble fashion production workers (Neff et al., 2005). In these circumstances the collective labour process is itself divided between jobs that have a high individual and

5 For middle-class fears and a front line account of life in the menagerie of work see Erhenreich (1990; 2002; 2006).

named content and jobs that are blank and anonymous, much like the distinction between credited and uncredited roles in acting.⁶

In sum, the distinction between service and labour contracts a moral calculus that ennobles some activities and not others. Such a calculus drives people, particularly young people, to yearn for ‘glamorous’ jobs (Hearn, 2006). Contemporary management theory, with its intensive weighing of employee motivation, exercises a parallel moral fascination (Fleming and Sewell, 2002; Scott, 1998).

From another aspect, these kinds of jobs are collective imaginative riffs on the categories of real and formal subsumption. In general terms, subsumption varies according to the extent that the capitalist owns the means of production and controls the work that is done. With modular and fractal jobs, capitalist possession of the means of production is the norm, but the actual work process remains within the worker’s discretion – a condition of formal subsumption. MacJobs (now iMacjobs) have the fullest potential for autonomy or distance from direct control of the labour process by management because they require scarce skill sets; in McJobs the work process is prescribed in detail by management, leaving workers to supply a personal coloration to a standardized script of service. Such jobs are a mix of real and formal subsumption. In ergometric jobs, the organisation of the work process is under the direct control of the capitalist – a condition of real subsumption (Marx, 1976: 1019-1028; Ouggaard, 2008).

But as already pointed out, beyond the social relations of production aspects of these kinds of jobs sit as scheme of valuation and worth. Modular, fractal and ergometric jobs are not seen as equally valuable in terms of the capacity to give meaning and direction to the individual. The cascade of descending value from the modular, fractal and ergometric job derives from the interface between the liberal and neo-liberal governance of the subject. Ergometric and fractal subjects are historic survivals from the era of liberal capitalism, still relevant today for the realities of menial work in the service sector and manual labour. The liberal model of the subject is the possessive individual whose spiritual and intellectual needs are set aside in the sale of labour power. Under the logic of the cash nexus, the social and cultural needs of the worker are deemed a private matter to be resolved in the realm of consumption. The modular subject, by contrast, rests on the category of the neo-liberal subject, of the self-appreciative individual in which more is sought and expected from work than its economic reward. The self-appreciative individual seeks to improve his or herself as human capital and expects self-esteem and self-development – in short, dignity – to an important part of the rewards of work (Feher, 2009). Ideally, high wages and high ‘spiritual’ value are positively correlated but they need not be. Indeed the norms of self appreciation rationalise a reduction of the rewards of employment – including low pay or the donation of free labour, the foregoing of benefits such as health insurance, holiday pay and job security. In this sense, the norms of self-appreciation constitute a

6 Virno (2001) writes about immaterial labour as virtuosity: as an exercise of powers within a network of processes that produce a suite of products and services. But he is much more cautious in distinguishing between conscripted and unscripted (or open forms) of virtuosity. In the former case, what Virno calls virtuosity moves closer to what is otherwise termed task-directed performance

pragmatic compromise of the Kantian ethics of purposelessness that sees pay as an irrelevance compared to the right to live a valuable life.

The appreciative subject – he or she who accepts the development and maintenance of their human capital and social capital as a personal, work related responsibility- is the poster boy and girl of the ‘information’ economy in general and of modular work in particular. Appreciative subjects are not uninterested in economic reward, no wage earner can be, but they are prepared to weigh cash against the psychic opportunities for self-development. This may explain the attraction of cool jobs in which the prestige of association clearly outweigh immediate gains and the long-term uncertainties of success. In this sense, all the world of cool jobs approximates to a performer taking jobs to build up a profile and network (Blair, 2001). The discourse of creativity surrounding digital labour is an important means for insinuating the ideology of self-appreciating labour to work per se. In this manner, the norms of self-appreciation, especially as promulgated by the media, become the ever-receding horizon and yearned-for utopian prospect for those whose social destiny is confined to the realm of ergometric and, especially, fractal forms of service work.

Digital value

The contemporary mapping of good work is a kind of ongoing soap opera of personality, which accounts for the pervasiveness of the theatrical metaphor. There are ‘star’ jobs that permit a maximum latitude for self-expression and ‘walk-on’ jobs that require the exact same actions with every ‘take’ and the suppression of individuality; jobs flush with personality and those emptied of it.

Beyond these local yet direct coercions of mental and physical labour power, in a globally networked division of labour, distributed work processes suck human mental and physical resources into an undifferentiated pool of energy for abstract co-operation under conditions of economic and moral inequality.

My primary claim has been that the representation of good to creative labour accomplishes the disappearance of class by a rendering occupational change as a kind of moral uplift for certain kinds of work – content rich and digitally driven. Digital labour is a key ‘brand’ in this process; the ultimate moral dignifier articulates a judgement on the worth of the person of the worker (Sayer, 2005). There is nothing new in this tendentious celebration of conformity, save its new digital clothes.

Digital labour finds its metaphoric personification in modular work, ordering in a cascade the moral value assigned to fractal and ergometric work forms. At the same time there is seemingly something quite progressive – it might be called post-capitalist – in the digital reanimation of the Kantian notion of dignity as an end in itself. In closing, let me note two aspects of what might be called errors of personification.

It will be recalled that under capitalist social relations of production, productive labour is labour that produces surplus value (Marx, 1976: 1038-1041). Management’s celebration of the ‘creativity’ of digital labour is marked by the equation of ‘creativity’ with profitability (Schlesinger, 2007; Peck, 2005). Such a self-interested evocation

draws on an ostensibly transcendent (and hegemonic) celebration of labour power. In this sense, the attractiveness of Richard Florida's fantasy of a creative class draws on popular sentiments that go back to notions of a labour aristocracy and the Gospel of Work. But, there is deeper resonance that pushes beyond the confines of capitalist accumulation. It will be recalled that Marx defined good work as work that was not alienated by capitalist social relations of production, within which the worker underwent a tripartite process of estrangement – from the 'fruits' (commodities) of the expenditure of labour power, from cooperative relationships with other workers, and from nature as it was transformed by the worker's activities, including the worker's own nature as a process of self-development and transformation. The result of these estrangements was the loss of connection to the ontological vocation of being human, of creating and developing the species-being (Marx, 1992: 266-270). Digital technologies, if released from the confines of private property in the means of production, have the potential to establish a collective dominion over organic and inorganic nature (Dyer-Witheford, 2006).⁷

But such capacities are currently imagined only within the needs and dispositions that serve capitalism. Species-being is rendered as an accomplishment found only at the top of the ensemble of the work order. The stars of the modular realm, as capitalists or aspiring capitalists, confirm that powers of the collective can richly endow the life of the individual qua individual. In capital fetishism, the capitalist, as the personification of capital, appears as the source, the veritable demiurge that creates value. For the rest, there remains the mute appreciation of the creativity of labour as the enclosure of genius.

The second aspect of personification rests on another sleight of hand. Within a social formation in which occupational access is restricted and tenure precarious, there is a tendency to fetishize the powers of the collective. A fetishism of the collective is entirely understandable given the vast store of resources and stored knowledge – itself the product of the exercise of collective labour in the past. Being orphaned from that heritage confers a sedulous and slowly dawning sense of disinheritance on those excluded from it. In this connection one might consider the fate of the 99ers, unemployed workers who have used up the allotted 99 weeks of benefits in the US to get a sense of this alienation from the collective (Harris, 2010).

Perhaps here is the imaginary engine of geek culture, the deep longing to participate in media popular culture, to be somebody in the light of what has been and is being made and remade.

There is a fetishism of the collective, or the general intellect (the moment of the multitude) that operates as the complement to the capital fetish typical of the era of industrial capitalism. This fetishism is that mode of appearance of value in which the technology of production – including machines and systems of organising people – assumes the role of a demiurge (Vann, 2004). This new mode of personification cannot inhere as an abstraction within capitalist property relationships and must be given a human face or more exactly, a façade. The point of mediation, exemplification and

7 It is in this sense that Virno defines Post-Fordism as the Communism of Capital (2001: 110).

embodiment is now the work team that (under the entrepreneur's inspirational leadership, of course) becomes a corporate individual – following the precedent established in US law that a corporation is a person. Here can be found a clue to the origins of the prestigious cult of busyness in both work and leisure – everyone wants to be 'part of the action' (Gershuny, 2005). In this process, the historically constructed Promethean power of 'species-being' is parcelled out and captured out in a premium rent or 'human capital' for unique individuals. This incarnation requires its cast of players, its 'stars', its leading and supporting players and its fractal walk-ons, all of whom draw on the prestige of living life as an art form. In this manner a new status order of busyness, within both work and leisure, both substantive and perfunctory, colonises the terrain of creativity. But we need to remind ourselves, as actor network theory has told us, that what is obfuscated in these celebrations is the digital labourer's dependence on a system of material support and intellectual property relationships without which his or her 'creativity' cannot be recognised much less exercised (Herrero, 2010). Digital labour may be at its most creative when obscuring the social relationships of capitalism, this side of the end of work as we know it.

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