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The Los Angelisation of London

Three short-waves of young people's micro-economies of culture and creativity in the UK.

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This paper suggests that the recent development of the creative economy in the UK in terms of small-scale entrepreneurial activities can now be understood as three consecutive short-waves. This is activity undertaken not at company or organisation level, but more independently by (and here I apply a kind of Bourdieusian frame), both (upper) working class and (lower) middle class young people in the UK, who have, for a variety of both historical and social structural reasons gravitated to the spheres of culture and creativity and have also in effect become individualised and disembedded from employment in large-scale social institutions, thus corresponding with an updated version of Bourdieu's category of cultural intermediaries (Bourdieu 1984). Of course we could put this another way round and see the regulative dynamics of the post-Fordist employment environment exerting its effect by addressing a certain class strata of young people as now more fully agents of their own employment destiny, where in the past they would have been interpellated more surely as subjects of

state or institutional employment, or else (pace Bourdieu or indeed Ulrich Beck) they would be a better educated strata of unemployed young people.

In fact I am assuming for the sake of this short intervention that readers are familiar with the value of the Bourdieusian, and Foucauldian dynamics in this debate. Here I aim instead to emphasis what is indeed entailed when such subjects are called into action, and what comprises their activities. This is followed by a parallel analysis of how the New Labour government has developed a rapid response strategy to the idea of a cultural economy. New Labour's cultural policy agenda has been both radical and pervasive and is predicated on an outcome which is certainly nebulous or intangible in regard to the actual occupations and livelihoods which will emerge, but lucid in regard to the logic of unburdening both state and employers from fulfilling statutory obligations to employees.

Indeed let me start by saying that twenty years ago it was possible to talk about high culture and the high arts, opera, ballet, fine art, classical music, great literature and so on, as very separate from low culture, i.e. popular music, sub-cultural activity like graffiti, style, black expressive cultures like rap and hip hop, and also of course popular entertainment, including film and television. And of course this distinction and the patterns of consumption which ensued, also told us quite a good deal about how social hierarchies of class, race and sexuality and gender functioned in the UK. I am not claiming that there is no longer a division of this type between high and low culture, indeed at some point we may wish to have a discussion about how new micro-distinctions are produced in regard to hierarchies of art and culture in response to the creation of new more fluid and unstable positions in cultural labour

markets,
but for the moment such a process can only be alluded to.

I will be suggesting that when the arts and culture per se, become the focal point for capitalisation, (the logic of late capitalism as Fredric Jameson famously put it) when culture broadly becomes absolutely imperative to economic policy and urban planning, when art is instrumentalised so that it begins to provide a model for working lives, and labour processes, and when government opens a Green Paper document as it did in 2001 with the words 'Everyone is creative', then it becomes apparent that what in the past was considered the icing on the cake, has now become a main ingredient of the cake (DCMS 2001). And what had been in the past left to its own devices e. g. subculture and style, or black expressive culture or the punk avant-garde has been plucked, over the years, from obscurity, and is now promoted with tedious regularity under the prevailing logic of the revival, in the window spaces of Selfridges and Harrods almost every season as a leading edge feature of the UK's contribution to the new global cultural economy. Our imagined community and branded national identity now comes to be constituted through practices which are understood to be creative. This appellation is then deployed in policies which introduce such things as Creative Partnerships[1] into schools across the country to incorporate a kind of third sector of education and training which is neither technical nor strictly academic and into which are slotted substantial numbers of young people. We still have no real idea of how this will work out on the longer term and what kinds of careers will develop, but this notion of creative education emerges as a modernising and mobilising strategy which will tap into young people's existing attachment to arts, popular culture and contemporary media. This then is where

the investment is being made, in a perceived immersion in and connection with the field of media and culture.

What follows is to begin with a narrative account of this development, with particular reference not to the big media industries and communications corporations, and not to the role of government and the subsidies which have always gone to national theatre, the large orchestras, opera and ballet, but instead to the innovative youth subcultures which have largely comprised of young people who occupy precarious positions in regard to educational and cultural capital.

I undertook an investigation of small-scale UK fashion designers in the 1990s in the UK. I focussed on fashion because it was female-dominated and a sector which had no back-up from fashion equivalents of the music industry, as was the case for young people in bands, nor did it have the prestige and cultural capital associated with the fine arts, even if that meant earning a pittance and remaining totally unknown as a struggling sculptor or visual artist, it still carried more (usually masculine) gravitas than being a fashion designer (McRobbie 1998). So I was interested in the popular, feminine and sub-cultural aspects of fashion design, but less on the consumption and more on production. This research was actually precipitated from my earlier youth culture research, I was fascinated by the way in which, as these forms matured in the context of post-war UK society. Into the mid to late 1980s they seemed to create their own informal labour markets. In one short article I examined the work of sub-cultural entrepreneurs, the young people who were influenced by the post punk do-it-yourself ethos and who sought to create not an 'alternative cultural economy' in the late 1960s sense but instead an 'indie' or independent economy (McRobbie 1989/1994). And then Sarah Thornton coined the term sub-cultural capital, which showed how

these forms were able to generate their own micro-economies and micro-media (Thornton 1995) Indeed it was within the world of ragmarkets and second hand dresses that what was later to become the absolute distinctiveness of British fashion design emerged, there was it seemed a fruitful and fortuitous overlap between the stylish pursuits of young women on the edge of subcultures and the wide range of fashion design courses available in every art school and small art college across the country thanks to the work of the great 19th C Victorian administrators, the social reformers as well as the advocates of arts and crafts, and then later in the 20th C the pioneers of art and design. There was in effect wide provision of education, training and skills for a wide sector of the female population from the respectable working class and from the lower middle class especially in the big industrial cities like London, Manchester, Birmingham and Glasgow. By the 1980s and early 1990s, this provision in the UK art schools and universities had become greatly expanded (more than 5000 fashion and fashion-related graduates per annum) but still directed towards the less-privileged school leavers, including young women from immigrant families, or girls whose parents, mostly mothers, wanted to see them doing a job they enjoyed in a white collar or semi-professional/professional environment.

The first wave of self-generated sub-cultural entrepreneurs who were to be found busily inventing styles, sewing in their own kitchens and then selling what they made at weekend street-markets provided what we would now call incubators for experimenting in creative self-employment. This ‘first wave’ in my own analysis made an impact as young female pioneers of the small scale enterprises during the years 1985-1995, through close connections with the new magazines also spawned from youth culture like the influential Face and iD (by the way all who worked

on these were unpaid) they gained all the publicity they needed to launch hundreds of 'small labels' on a cottage-industry basis summed up in the phrase 'I was knitting away night and day'.

However this burst of colourful activity had success at the level of press and media attention but was financially unsustainable leading to bankruptcy and debt. These were always under-capitalised, and received very little support from government, for example they were not eligible for fine art awards. They in fact emerged out of the shadow of unemployment during the Thatcher years and the most the young designers could expect was a small bank loan scheduled to be paid back with low interest rates. Working literally from the kitchen table to the small shop or outlet they were not able to manage sales abroad, many of them had their work bought from the shop rails but only to be copied by high street retailers and also by bigger name designers in Europe and in the US.

But there was this incredible bubble of creativity and huge amounts of energy and also impact between the worlds of fashion and popular music at that time. This was also a feminised sector and the young women I interviewed also benefited from the impact of feminism in schools and in college, in terms of following an independent career and equally important they had parents or mothers who encouraged the idea of meaningful or rewarding work. Mostly from lower middle class backgrounds and upper working class this was the sector of the population for whom the idea passed on by parents of 'refusal of mundane work' was most visible. Maurizio Lazzarato describes this refusal of tedious, repetitive, exploitative and mundane work as part of the workers struggle of the 1970s now extended inter-generationally (Lazzarato 2007). We can add to his argument a double-inflection, at least in the UK, first a feminist dynamic which permits the refusal of under-paid women's work and its replacement by more

independently defined work which also becomes a source of self-realisation. Here there is also a hope for a better working life for daughters on the part of mothers. For these young women we could say new forms of work (what Lazzarato calls 'immaterial labour') become sites of 'passionate attachment'. Creative work is a space of romantic idealisation perhaps more rewarding than personal relationships. And second we could develop a very interesting argument here which connected Lazzarato's account of mundane job refusal as a vector of class struggle with the Birmingham CCCS analysis of working class youth cultures as in effect also playing out at symbolic level the sublimated class struggle which the parent culture both buried and also transmitted to their children (Hall and Jefferson 1976). If the latter analysis provided (pace Althusser) an account of sub-cultural style in its spectacular modalities, then the former helpfully elucidates the productive features of these micro-economies. This adds to existing analysis a logic of inter-generational class struggle in my own case of course inextricably intersecting with gender.

This moment of the first wave did not last, but the ethos has subsequently been extended across a much wider section of the young population. It failed really because government wanted the sector to understand free market forces and competition. They had to learn lessons the hard way, despite advocates who pushed for better support and investment. However this championing by a few people like myself was at the time also rather lonely because the old left and the trade unionists were not interested in such small-scale activities, they had doubts about any progressive politics emerging from these forms of self- employment, and indeed they saw such work as self-exploitation, based on deluded fantasies of success, or else as small petty bourgeois businesses with no politics of solidarity and also unrealistically positioned in relation to the

predatory high street and the big fashion retailers. Nor were academic feminists specialising in work and employment particularly interested since their attention was invariably drawn to the conditions of working class women in more traditional workplaces. So these incubators had little support and by the mid to late 1990s they were disintegrating and being replaced by 'second wave' multi-taskers.

In the 2002 article *Club to Company* I chart the characteristics of the second wave young creatives in the more 'speeded up' cultural economy in the UK which benefits more directly from the growth of new media and the hovering presence of venture capitalists which converge in the clubbing spaces of network sociality (McRobbie 2002, Wittel 2001).[2] These include a) de-specialisation b) hybrid job designations e.g. events organiser, arts advisor c) internships, work for nothing and job creation from unpaid work d) the night economy creating day-time livelihoods with the growth of leisure culture, clubbing and party economy, e) the expansion of network and freelance culture in the light of big institutions undertaking organisational change, shedding the workforce and then taking them back on as self-employed f) the growth of London and other global cities as creative centres for arts and culture as attractions for the finance sector and for tourism and consequently the increase in the labour markets for multi-skilled and adaptable young people, g) decline in possibilities for association and collectivity in the light of the speeded-up new media and internet economy, replacement by network sociality i.e. informal grapevine for job search, in the club, or bar, in culture sector districts. I argued this is a more thoroughly neo-liberalised model. There is hardly any need to deal with bureaucracy, and without any of the anti-discrimination legislation in place what happens is that old and more elite and socially exclusive patterns

re-emerge and come to distinguish the world of second wave small scale creative economies. Issues of race and ethnicity, of gender and sexuality have no space for expression because either it is assumed in this cultural field that such issues have now been dealt with and that equality is taken for granted, or else there is such competitive individualisation that there is no forum, no space or time for such concerns to be aired in a public milieu. Hence there is re-internalisation of anxiety, privatised modes of anger or disappointment, the must-try-harder ethos, patterns of self-blame in such a hyper-individualised environment (as Bauman explains) and in addition the non-existence of protection, means that new forms of self reliance must also be invented. (Where it is normal to be holding down let us say four projects at one time, if at least one of them is a contract with a public sector organisation or agency of the state, then there at least there will be some minimal workplace entitlement e.g. pay for sickness, or holiday). Thus notions of security become not fixated on full time employment but sought out in partial or fractional employment.

The third wave springs into life in the last five years. It bears all the hallmarks of the Blair period. It is characterised not by the post-punk ethos of the first wave or the party or night-time entrepreneurialism of the second wave, but by the Hollywood effect, the winner takes all, indeed if the UK has taken the lead from the US in matters of war and on the battlefield, so also, in the field of culture and creativity are we looking to the US and to the global entertainment industry as the source for shaping working lives, the Los Angelisation of London and the impact this has for the rest of the UK and for UK isolationism in the context of European cultural policy. More significantly the US is also looked to for rationalisations regarding the shift towards the concept of creativity and its role in the economy.[3] Blair's go it

alone agenda is also mirrored in the new creative economy. This third wave is more nebulous and hard to define, partly because it is so bound up with deeper social transformations which involve re-defining notions of selfhood and which encourage more expansive forms of self reliance. These new more flexible forms of selfhood are institutionally grounded in education through pedagogical styles as well as the transformation of the curriculum. In the arts, media and culture self-reliance corresponds with styles of working on a project-by-project basis.

The third wave I am attempting to describe typically entails having a single project which is one's own work, a kind of magic card which it is hoped will one day come to fruition, but which in the meantime is propped up by three or four more mundane and income-generating projects. The underlying logic of the third wave is the idea of the one big hit. If the typical arts or humanities graduate leaving university needs to learn to navigate her or his way around the world of funded projects in order to put together a living (e. g. two days editing an on-line fashion magazine, two days working as a stylist for a fashion agency, one day a week in reception at a gallery) then she will be spending also a lot of time networking, keeping doors open for when projects finish, and new ones begin. But what she really wants is in fact a big hit of her own, something that allows her to position herself more strongly and emphatically in this competitive creative labour market. This is usually something related to her own work which she will nurture at weekends and in the evening. A single big hit is what almost everyone inside the creative economy is hoping for, because it can have a transformative effect, it can lift the individual out of the pressure of multi-tasking and all the exhausting networking this entails. The one big hit also provides a facilitating connection between the small-scale activities which can be carried out without

major investment by the independent producer, and the large company sector which are able to provide the capital to turn the small original into a global product. This projected passage from micro-activity carried out at home or round the kitchen table to macro-activity involving key players from the global culture industry also functions as another mode of self-disciplining. This is most evident in the encouragement on the part of government to uncover one's own potential, to search out the special qualities of creativity which we all surely possess. This ethos is a key feature of the so-called talent-led economy. This shift into third wave cultural working relies on a total mobilisation of self, so that every ounce of potential can be put to good economic use. It requires an inflated degree of self-belief which is surely unsustainable.

The one big hit can mean a variety of things, but in essence it produces a ripple effect in terms of widening options and possibilities and it also enhances the status and power of the 'award-winner' in the cultural economy. For the final year student of fashion it will mean a big hit with the degree show that lands a short contract job offer with a French, American or Italian fashion house, in television it typically means one big idea which establishes a niche or a genre, in music it means a single track which doesn't need to make it to the top of the charts but will succeed if it crosses over from the dancefloor right onto the soundtrack for an advert on television (*Shake Your Ass* by Groove Armada), or indeed as background for any number of gardening or make over TV programmes (e. g. the ubiquitous Gotan Project).

While the dream of the big hit has always existed (as Adorno pointed out in his famous *Culture Industry* essay) it has in the last few years become normalised and located right in the heart of culture industry discourse. As London seems to become a 'one-company town' and as other cities in the UK each set up their own

cultural strategy, the big hit in the creative sector is conflated with the star system as a means of branding a national and international image of cities across the UK (eg Edinburgh is promoted through its association with JK Rowling and *Harry Potter*, Irvine Welsh and *Trainspotting*, Ian Rankin and his detective hero Rebus). The most sought after big hit is frequently a novel or diary (following the lead from *Bridget Jones's Diary* or the more recent *The Devil Wears Prada*) that will be published and then made into a film. There are some examples, which have been so unexpected that the author is catapulted into a very different working environment from what she has been used to as Lionel Shriver, the author of the novel *We Need To Talk About Kevin* has recently described.[4]

Let me move to a conclusion of this discussion of the normalisation of the exceptional big hit, and the way in which being in search of one's own talent is now the key element of what used to be called labour discipline. In the UK at least, this seeking out of ones own creativity, as a kind of inner self, is a dominant feature of contemporary governmentality. Within a framework of subjects relevant to this practice of cultural governance the new self is defined as primarily productive and creative, the two become inseparable with the latter compensating for the exhaustive dynamics of the former.

The third wave of creative economy pushes for change also in more bureaucratic, rigid or seemingly inflexible and professional institutions such as the university. And although more directly experienced by people under the age of 45, it increasingly has an impact across all ages of working people. The one big hit model is also supremely exportable, in projects across diverse institutions it can mean a windfall, the guarantee of an extended lifetime of a range of activities in private and public micro- and macro-

organisations. The competitive ethos which underlies the rationale for the one big hit comes to be applied across the various sectors as part of a changing regime of accountability and auditing. In the context of small independent projects even those funded ultimately by the state, this model normalises precariousness and uncertainty and makes irrelevant formal social relations of working life including statutory obligations, it thus permits the by-passing of the old order and of protective and anti-discriminatory legislation associated with the previous regime of social democratic and welfarist provision. By-passing is then an instrument of neo-liberal reform which under the rubric of what Blair calls modernisation in effect de-commissions (or at least makes marginal, puts into cold storage) the field of statutory obligations in working lives.[5] This strategy can be seen in operation across a wide range of sectors in which government has a role to play. The impact of American thinking in regard to the place of creativity in the contemporary economy is highly visible and this work emerges from business schools where there is a focus on psychology and cognitive sciences rather than sociology. However it is the mark of New Labour's highly innovative approach that these ideas are made to converge with more conventionally social policies designed to alleviate disadvantage. For example the Chancellor's award of £30 per week to 16 year olds from poor homes as a way of ensuring that they stay on at school until 18 and gain qualifications to take them into university or college, intersects with initiatives being undertaken elsewhere in the education system to make arts and creative education a much more significant and mainstream element of the curriculum, in effect a good reason to stay on at school.[6] Other activities and proposals also contribute to the combination of arts, enterprise and upskilling within the educational field, e.g. Scottish Enterprise, the possible raising of the school leaving age to 18, the

role of Creative Partnerships in secondary schools, and the introduction of new media and arts qualifications.

These diverse programmes and proposals constitute intense activity on the part of government, and from then we can begin to discern a kind of theatrical effect. Young people are being trained as though for the stage, even when working lives will be far removed from the 'greasepaint'. But even David Brent, the lead character in Ricky Gervais's *The Office*, also a global success for BBC TV, sets his aspiration well beyond the tedium of the Slough paper company which he manages. It is his night-time career (not so far successful) as a stand-up comedian which lifts him out of the limited horizons of office work. The upskilling curve also transforms traditionally low paid or routine jobs into something more spectacular.

The most recent papers and policy documents by the UK government on matters of culture and economy envisage remarkable growth in the creative sector and also make a strong case for the production of complex culture against the dangers of 'dumbed-down' entertainment.[7] Taken alongside the cultural (rather than social) engineering undertaken in the education system to upskill young people who might otherwise fail, this strategy also has the intention of expanding the middle classes and making them more self-sufficient, indeed it may be that this is, at the present moment in time, a sufficient outcome, from the point of view of New Labour. This would also entail some kind of coming to terms with long term permanently transitional work, it would also require higher degrees of self responsibility and the internalisation and individualisation of failure, it would sideline past work ethics which as Sennett has shown value process, craft, solidarity and the patterns of the ordinary working day (Sennett 2005). It would make of us all, if not singers, dancers and Spice

Girls, then at least individuals or subjects for whom unprecedented degrees of self-belief will be needed to sustain a life in the new world of precarious creative labour. This theatricalisation effect is characterised by a nebulous or even opaque sense of outcome. Government reports are almost evangelical when it comes to indicating the benefits of the new creative ethos in education and employment, but there is silence in regard to the actual kinds of work which will be created by all of this effort at the level of policy. In addition the discourse of creativity is marked in its preference for the language of US psychology and its evasion of research and the critical vocabularies associated with European including UK sociology and of course cultural studies.

While the neo-liberal effect is not hard to pinpoint in terms of the by-passing mechanism referred to above, I would say that there is a good deal more to this revolution in the category of work and productive activity than the obviously pejorative label neo-liberal suggests. Earlier in this article I alluded to the proposal from Lazzarato that the desire for meaningful work emerges from a context of previous generations of class struggle. We could attach onto this a more Foucauldian sense of the desire for new more rewarding work as a variant on self-aestheticisation, a body politics rendered at the level of re-orchestrating the available technologies of self inscribed in current practices of governmentality.

To focus on such a terrain would be to understand these sites of creativity and productive activity in regard to self-employment as micrological sites of conflict and tension. What remains of class struggle is now deflected onto this field of precariousness. The most apparent sign of success on the part of New Labour in the UK, is the by-passing of 'old labour' and its terrain of entitlement and protection, and in addition the newly configured landscape of mental labour as the site for the extraction of surplus value on a

scale undreamt of by previous theorists of labour process, with the added advantage that this now entails the suspension of critique in favour of the hope, indeed expectation that there will be some tangible reward in such a form that will promise both status and security.[8] What is also by-passed in the new discourse of creative self-realisation is the intellectual landscape of critical aesthetics certainly associated with the Marxist philosophical tradition which of course disputed the myth of genius, which undermined the ideology of individual creativity, and indeed which in subsequent writing from Bourdieu to Barthes and from Foucault to Derrida, drew attention to the inflated place of the author or artist as a field of secular belief which among other things devalued an ethics of collaboration and a politics of critique. Thus what appears to be at stake in the new field of mental labour is the role and meaning of intellectual labour, currently being seen as outmoded in contrast to the creative energies of the new cultural producer. In such a context this process of championing new forms of creative education (e. g. the live project, the links with industry, internships, the role of creative partnerships) also occludes the place of theory, and the space of critical pedagogy.

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[1] See http://www.creative-partnerships.com/

[2] see http://www.nelp.de/beitraege/02_farbeit/mcrobbie_e.htm

[3] Kim Allen (PhD student at Goldsmiths College University of London) is currently working on New Labour implementation of US theories of creativity in the school, training and the workplace.

[4] See various interviews with Lionel Shriver in the UK Guardian and Independent.

[5] This is a polemical point on my own part, in need of further elaboration re-legislation to cover part time working, and the role of the industrial tribunal system.

[6] Once again see forthcoming PhD by Kim Allen in particular the growth of Arts Academies, performing arts education and media arts provision across all sectors of the UK education system.

[7] Government and the Value of Culture DCMS 2004.

[8] An example from the academy. Write the thesis for the award of PhD, then use all the research to write a novel. If it succeeds as has been the case for author Sarah Waters the author of among other novels *Fingersmith*, and *Tipping the Velvet* the rewards in terms of BBC TV adaptations can be tremendous.