



Expression and expropriation: The dialectics of autonomy and control in creative labour

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abstract

Creative labour occupies a highly contradictory position in modern, global, 'knowledge-based' economies. On the one hand, companies have to balance their insatiable need for a stream of innovative ideas with the equally strong imperative to gain control over intellectual property and manage a creative workforce. On the other, creative workers have to find a balance between the urge for self-expression and recognition and the need to earn a living. This article explores the interplay between these doubly contradictory impulses, drawing on the results of European research carried out within the scope of the WORKS project as well as other research by the author. It argues that the co-existence of multiple forms of control makes it difficult for workers to find appropriate forms of resistance. Combined with increasing tensions between the urges to compete and to collaborate, these contradictions pose formidable obstacles to the development of coherent resistance strategies by creative workers.

Introduction

Creative labour occupies a highly contradictory position in modern, global, 'knowledge-based' economies. On the one hand, companies have to balance their insatiable need for a stream of innovative ideas with the equal strong imperative to gain control over intellectual property and manage a creative workforce. On the other, creative workers have to find a balance between the urge for self-expression and recognition and the need to earn a living. The interplay between these antagonistic imperatives produces a complex set of relations, encompassing a variety of forms both of collusion and of conflict between managers, clients and workers, with each action provoking a counter-reaction in a dynamic movement that resembles an elaborate minuet, in which some steps follow formal conventions but new moves are constantly being invented.

This dialectical dance forms the subject of this article. The choice of topic is rooted in a general interest in the contradictory role of creative workers in the restructuring of global capital, a role which renders them simultaneously both complicit agents of restructuring and victims of it (see Huws, 2006). However the immediate stimulus for

the article was the results of some European research carried out by the WORKS (Work Organisation Restructuring in the Knowledge Society) project¹ which carried out extensive research across the EU between 2005 and 2009. Alongside quantitative and theoretical analysis, this project carried out in-depth case studies on the impacts of value chain restructuring on work organisation and the quality of working life, across a range of different industries (Flecker et al., 2008) and occupational groups (Valenduc et al., 2007) and in contrasting national settings.

These studies uncovered major differences between countries, industries and occupational groups. Nevertheless, there were some very striking common trends that cut across all these variables, in particular a noticeable standardisation and intensification of work and a speed-up of its pace. Linked in many cases with a growing precariousness of work, these had strongly negative impacts not only on the quality of work but also on feelings of security and career prospects as well as on the quality of life outside the workplace, especially for people with children or other care responsibilities (Flecker et al., 2009; Krings et al., 2009; Huws et al., 2009). These results, which were confirmed by an analysis of the results of the European Working Conditions Survey (Greenan, Kalugina and Walkowiak, 2007), were particularly pronounced amongst white-collar workers, who were being put under pressure from a number of different directions, including the need to work to externally-determined targets, to respond directly to demands from customers, sometimes in different time zones, and to exercise a growing range of communications and emotional skills on top of their core tasks (Ramioul and De Vroom, 2009).

Despite the fact that a high proportion of the workers interviewed experienced these effects as negative and that many of the 57 in-depth organisational case studies were carried out in companies and industries that were unionised, and quite a few in countries with a strong tradition of collective bargaining that is consensual, at least in comparison to the USA or UK (e.g. Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Germany, Austria, Belgium and the Netherlands), it was striking that there had been remarkably little resistance to these changes. As Meil, Tengblad and Docherty (2009: 65) concluded, 'Union or works council response was generally passive or reactive and focused mainly on dealing with the employment consequences of restructuring rather than influencing the shape of the new structure'; and 'very few (if any) examples of representation influence the change itself. The management prerogative in defining restructuring seems almost total' (ibid: 69).

The 300-odd workers interviewed in the 30 'occupational case studies' linked to the 57 'organisational case studies' included a range of different groups, some of whom might be regarded as having quite a bit of individual negotiating power with employers or clients (fashion designers, researchers in R&D for IT products, and software engineers), so it might be expected that some would resist in individualised and personal ways rather than collective ones. However the interviews showed little evidence of this either.

1 This project was funded under the European Commission's 6th Framework programme as an integrated Project, under the leadership of Monique Ramioul, at the Higher Institute of Labour Studies of the Catholic University of Leuven, with 17 partner institutes in 14 EU countries. See <http://www.worksproject.be> for further information.

In fact it was software engineers, who might be supposed to be more individualistic than the manual or clerical workers also included in the study, who provided the only instance of a strong collective response to restructuring, with one group of IT workers taking strike action in an attempt to resist outsourcing (Dahlmann, 2007; 2008).

In retrospect, this failure of ‘knowledge workers’ to resist restructuring of their work even when they know that it will be deleterious is one of the most surprising results of the whole project. Like the dog that failed to bark in the night in the Sherlock Holmes story, it provokes the question: ‘Why not?’ What can account for this failure to resist these negative changes either individually or collectively?

It occurred to me that, although this question was not directly addressed in the WORKS research design, it might be productive to re-examine the rich mass of data from the project to see what light it could shed on the contradictory position of ‘creative’ or ‘knowledge’ workers in value chain restructuring. In particular, I wondered whether these results might illuminate the complex and dynamic interplay between management’s drive to control the creative workforce on the one hand, and workers’ urges for autonomy on the other. This article is a first result of this process, looking at the results of the WORKS case studies but also drawing on some of my other past research as well as work by other authors. It begins by outlining the role of knowledge workers in value chain restructuring. Then it looks at what is distinctive about ‘creative’ knowledge-based work. It then moves on to a summary of current trends in the reorganisation of knowledge work before embarking on an analysis of the multiple forms of control that operate in knowledge work and the ways in which their interactions might impede effective resistance to management imperatives. Finally I draw some brief conclusions.

I have used the overlapping terms ‘knowledge worker’ and ‘creative worker’ somewhat interchangeably throughout, aware that neither is really adequate, especially when the knowledge which forms the content of the work and contributes to the occupational identities of many non-manual workers is undergoing a rapid process of commodification, degradation and reconstruction. I have discussed this vexed question of definition in greater depth elsewhere (Huws, 2003). By discussing the role that creativity plays within ‘knowledge’ work, as I do below, I hope to avoid too much terminological confusion.

The role of creative workers in capitalist development

It is more or less axiomatic, at least in a capitalist economic system, that growth depends on innovation. And the more global and competitive that system is, then the greater is the need for rapidity in this innovation. Since all innovation comes, ultimately, from human creativity, then creative workers are *ipso facto* integral to any development process.

This assertion is easily made, but distinguishing ‘creative workers’ from the general crowd of the global labour force is by no means a simple task, such is the complexity

and interconnectedness of the division of labour in which each activity is linked interdependently with so many others across spatial, temporal and corporate boundaries.

There is a sense in which all economic activity requires human ingenuity and knowledge. Just as basic human needs – for food, shelter, warmth, etc. – have not really changed over the millennia, neither have the tasks required to meet them. Human beings still extract and harvest the planet's natural resources, manipulate and recombine them, distribute them, consume them and dispose of the waste, as well as caring for and entertaining each other. Back in the mists of time, no doubt, many of these activities were carried out by workers who were fairly autonomous and free to improvise within the constraints of the resources and time available to them. However, over the centuries diverse social systems have developed complex divisions of labour, usually strongly gendered, many involving hierarchical forms of control. In these divisions of labour those who give orders have removed much of the scope for creativity of those who follow these orders. Under capitalism, changes in this division of labour have been highly dynamic – a continuous, if uneven, process of destruction and recomposition of sectors, organisations, labour processes and skills, driven by the imperative of maximising the extraction of value from any given unit of labour. In this process there has been an ongoing process of separation of tasks, in particular a separation of routine activities from those requiring initiative and imagination. Braverman (1974: 85-121) analysed and documented the use of Taylor's (1911) scientific management approach and its extension from the factory to office work (Braverman, 1974: 124-137) and introduced the concept of 'deskilling' as an essential component of this process, showing the ways in which the tacit knowledge of workers, as expressed in their labour processes, could be captured by managers, analysed, standardised and mechanised to create simplified processes that could be carried out by less skilled (and hence cheaper) workers. Followers of Braverman have tended to emphasise this 'deskilling' aspect of the restructuring of labour processes. However Braverman himself, like Taylor before him, made it clear that he regarded the separation of 'mental' activities from 'manual' ones as a process that also involved the creation of some new, more highly skilled activities. There is a close connection between the simplification of routine tasks and an expansion in the role of the manager. As Taylor put it: 'The management must take over and perform much of the work which is now left to the men; almost every act of the workman should be preceded by one or more preparatory acts of the management which enable him [*sic*] to do his work better and quicker than he otherwise could' (Taylor, 1911: Introduction).

As the results of the past division of labour become increasingly embedded in technologies, social systems and the physical infrastructure, and the current division of labour becomes more complex and geographically and contractually extended, there is often a separation between these 'mental' and 'manual' activities that makes it difficult to perceive their interconnections. When workers are in different companies, on different continents, linked only, perhaps, through a shared software platform, occasional meetings between intermediaries or the presence of the same logo, the interdependence of their activities (and their shared origins in a previously integrated job description) are rendered invisible.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to understand the role of creative labour in the overall development process without some analysis of the interlinkages between the different components of global value chains. Only then does it become possible to gain an insight into the functional relationship between creative work and capitalist development and, in doing so, the contradictory pressures which shape, and reshape, creative work, simultaneously generating new openings for innovation, and new skill-sets associated with emerging technologies, whilst routinising and deskilling, or even rendering obsolete, older occupations.

What, then, are these roles, and what imperatives shape them?

One important creative function is the *invention of new products*. There are several ways this can take place under advanced capitalism. One is a simple appropriation of something that has traditionally been made using craft methods and devising a means of mass production for it. Another is to develop new products in the Research and Development (R&D) department of a company where the creative work is carried out by employees. Alternatively, the labour might be acquired from a freelancer, an independent entrepreneur or smaller company (either voluntarily, through a subcontract, or involuntarily, through predatory acquisition). In yet another scenario, the research may be carried out in a university, subsidised from public or charitable funds and then handed over to a private company for exploitation. In each of these situations, the relationship of the creator of the work to the company producing the final product will be different, as will his or her relationship to the intellectual property in the creation. These specific conditions of ownership, control and management will, directly or indirectly, influence the power relations between the parties and shape the working life of the creative worker in terms of income and autonomy.

Related to the function of developing new products is that of *customising, improving or adapting them for different purposes or different markets*. Once again, we have a wide range of possible relationships between these creative workers and capital, which may be governed by a range of different employment contracts, licensing agreements or contracts for the supply of services. This category may be expanded to include a variety of activities involving ephemeral *design and styling* (e.g. of clothing or household goods).

Linked to the function of adapting and customising products is that of *providing content* for various forms of media. Many such activities have their origins in traditional forms of art and entertainment and the workers who produce them cover a vast range of occupations: writers, musicians, visual artists, film producers and technicians, graphic designers, translators, web-site designers and many more, with solitary and introspective activities at one extreme and highly technical ones, requiring intensively interactive team-working at the other. These are, perhaps, the workers most people think of when the term 'creative' is used. However their activities are increasingly embedded in the global value chains of large companies or reliant on such companies for distribution or patronage and, although their relationships with these companies are perhaps even more varied than those described so far, it is difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish these workers clearly from other categories in the same value chain.

Overlapping with these content-generating activities is another set of activities connected with *providing information to the public, education and training*. Again, these are increasingly hard to isolate. As education and training become commodified, for example, there is a continuum between face-to-face teaching in real time, engaging in various distance-learning activities and providing content for course materials delivered electronically. Similarly, the provision of government information, usage instruction for appliances or customer service information by companies is increasingly likely to be delivered online or via a call centre, with new divisions of labour between specialist authors at one extreme and deskilled workers providing information from standard scripts at the other. In the past, it might have seemed logical to make a clear distinction between commercial information provision and the provision of information to citizens by the state (and regard the latter as part of the function of governance), but the commodification of public services and the growth in outsourcing them to the private sector or consigning them to the voluntary sector has rendered such a distinction increasingly anachronistic. Nevertheless, it remains the case that a considerable amount of creative labour is invested in the *legitimation and reproduction of the power of the state*, as well as the *reproduction of the workforce*, so creative work should not be regarded as solely concerned with the development and circulation of commodities for the market. Here too we find a variety of different relationships both to the intellectual property that is produced and to the employer, including the bureaucratic relationships of civil servants with the governments that employ them, more contingent employment relationships, including self-employment, and commercial contracts between companies, with the workers' output being regarded sometimes as a public good, sometimes as a product in its own right and sometimes as a form of advertising.

My final category of creative work is even harder to delineate from other categories of labour, only in this case the blurred boundary is with management and technical functions. This is the creative labour that goes into *inventing new systems and processes, or adapting old ones for new purposes*. Very often, these systems and processes involve the labour processes of other workers. Without this particular form of creativity, the current global division of labour could not exist. Christened 'living think work' by Hales (1980), this is the labour that analyses the labour processes of others, works out how to standardise them, automate them, outsource them, manage them and recruit and train the workers. Its practitioners may be systems designers or managers but they are increasingly likely to be working in large project-based teams that include technicians, trainers, human resources managers, managers who liaise with customers and suppliers and representatives of the local state, logistics experts, lawyers and a host of other specialists. Their 'soft' and 'knowledge-based' skills are not just used to develop new systems and refine and trouble-shoot older ones; they are also essential for the management of these systems once they are up and running, including 'knowledge management'.

This schematic overview demonstrates that creative work is involved in a range of different activities that are crucial to the development of capitalism. However it warns us against any assumption that the relationship between a worker's creativity and capital takes a single standard form. Rather, creative labour should be conceived as something extremely heterogeneous which is, moreover, undergoing rapid and dynamic change. This overview also demonstrates the impossibility of distinguishing 'creative

work' in any definitive way from other forms of work that can be loosely described as 'knowledge work'. Nevertheless, it can, perhaps, be said to have some distinguishing features which are worth investigating further. I now address these.

What is distinctive about creative work?

As already noted, it is impossible to draw an absolute line between 'creative' work and other forms of knowledge work in any structural analysis that looks at its relation to capital. Nevertheless, if we change the focus to the agency of creative workers and the ways in which their occupational identities have been socially and historically shaped, it becomes possible to identify some features, which, while neither unique to these creative workers nor universally prevalent amongst them, could be said to characterise them in certain distinctive ways. They are of interest here because they may be hypothesised to shape these workers' attitudes to their work and their relationships with employers and clients.

One of these features is a high commitment to the work itself. Applying one's mind to solving a new problem, as opposed to repeating a known activity, is of the essence of creative work, a process that Karl Marx, in the *Grundrisse* described in these terms:

this overcoming of obstacles is in itself a liberating activity – and [that,] further, the external aims become stripped of the semblance of merely external natural urgencies, and become posited as aims which the individual himself posits – hence as self-realization, objectification of the subject, hence real freedom, whose action is, precisely, labour. (Marx, 1973: 611)

Even if, much of the time, creative workers are engaged in mundane or repetitive work that does not require such original mental effort, insofar as this sort of problem-solving is involved, there is a sense in which this work contains elements of 'really free labour' which is experienced as unalienated – a form of personal fulfilment (see Sayers, 2003). This constitutes a source of genuine satisfaction, creating an additional motive to work that cannot be subsumed into the simple economic motive of earning a living. The worker does not only care about the monetary reward but also about the work's content (or intellectual property) which, even after it has been sold, may still be experienced as in some sense 'owned' – something of which it is possible to be proud. This attachment to the work may express itself in the form of a commitment to service users (for instance in education), audiences (for instance in performing arts) or customers (for instance in product design). It may also be linked with concerns about the worker's own personal reputation. In any bargaining process with employers or clients, trade-offs may be made between financial reward and other factors, such as public acknowledgement, a prestigious client or a greater degree of artistic freedom. This makes for a form of negotiation that is complicated in comparison with other employment relationships, and may be disadvantageous to the worker financially, especially in a situation where there is an oversupply of creative labour.

This strong identification with the product of the labour can leave workers with an illusion of continuing ownership, even when their intellectual property rights and control have been handed over. Being faced with the reality of this loss may then be painful. The experience of expropriation may come as a recurring shock, closer to the

surface of consciousness than in other forms of work where alienation is taken for granted. To the extent that it is genuinely innovative, creative work could be said to be permanently poised at the moment of alienation, and the creative worker at the centre of a drama of contradiction: the work, as it comes into being, both belongs to and is torn away from its begetter. Part of this belonging is the risk of failure; no innovation can be known before it comes into being (if it did, it would not be an innovation), so each time there is a risk that it will not work, or will be found ugly or otherwise unacceptable. Because in that moment of creativity the worker has not yet separated from his/her creation, this is experienced as a personal failure. The potential for rejection lurks always in the background of the creation-expropriation drama. This is most obviously acute in forms of creative work that are overtly affective and demand self-exposure (e.g. the performing arts, fiction-writing or film direction).

The identification of creative workers with their output was illustrated in the WORKS project by several fashion designers, such as those interviewed by Muchnik (2007). One said 'For me, fashion is a continuation of myself'. Two other designers were even more graphic: 'When you're a designer, it gets you in the guts' and 'It's a job you have to love because we spill our guts out' (quoted in Valenduc *et al.*, 2007: 36).

But performers and designers are not the only creative workers who make themselves vulnerable in carrying out their work, as is evidenced in the ubiquity of statements like 'you're only as good as your last project' or 'I put my reputation on the line'.

The personal identification of the innovative worker with his or her innovative idea also gives rise to another contradiction: between the individual and the collective interest; between competition and collaboration. If your ideas and knowledge are all you have to sell in the labour market, then they constitute a form of personal intellectual capital which, for reasons of self-interest, should not be parted with freely, but should be guarded and kept for future sale wherever possible. Offering these to the employer or sharing them with colleagues, with little guarantee of reward, can seem like a form of generosity verging on career suicide. However few forms of creative work can be carried out in isolation. Most involve team-work and, for the team to be successful, there is an equally strong self-interested imperative to share knowledge. A general willingness to share enables both learning and teaching; it also improves the overall standard of the project as a whole, thus enhancing everyone's chances of further work. Another important motivation for creative workers is a craving for recognition. Ideas may be shared, even with competitors, for the reward of appreciation or admiration.

Another associated feature of many types of creative work is that it has a 'meaning' in the form of some sort of ideological content or potential for social impact, positive or negative. Creative workers therefore have ethical choices to make about how their work is carried out. Sometimes this is linked to a formal responsibility, for instance in rules of professional conduct or in codes of practice. In other cases, it is up to individual workers to make a personal judgement about where to draw the line between meeting the demands of the employer or client on the one hand and standing by their own values on the other. Where creative workers feel themselves to have responsibility without power, taking an ethical stand may entail considerable courage and sacrifice. Failure to do so may result in being haunted by guilt.

We can conclude that, although creative workers form part of a continuum with other workers whose work, albeit knowledge-based, would not normally be regarded as creative, their experiences exhibit in a particular acute form a range of contradictions which, in more routine occupations, lie further below the surface. To the extent that they are actively engaged with a quest for meaning in their work, feel personally attached to it, seek aesthetic or moral rewards from it and invest their powers of mental focus on addressing the challenges it poses to them, they are unable to engage in the simple form of economic transaction that forms the basis of a labour market – ‘how much will you pay for my bodily time and effort?’ – without additional qualification and trade-off. This would seem to be a marketplace in which capital holds most of the bargaining power. However creative workers also hold some strong cards: they are not – as are many other workers – interchangeable with anyone else with equal bodily strength, endurance and agility; they have something capital desperately needs in order to develop further – new and original ideas. But, in a rapidly-changing economy, these ideas have a short shelf-life, and, with employers able to tap into an expanding global creative workforce, the competition is fierce. It is therefore not easy to predict how creative workers will fare in the next phase of capital restructuring. To set the context, the next section summarises current trends in the restructuring of knowledge-based work.

Current trends in the restructuring of knowledge-based work

The WORKS project carried out its research in a range of different industries, in contrasting national settings, and interviewed large numbers of workers in occupational groups ranging from fork-lift truck drivers to senior scientists in cutting-edge R&D laboratories. Nevertheless, despite numerous national, sectoral and occupational differences, it uncovered some strong common trends linked to value chain restructuring.

One of the most noticeable of these is a general trend of work *intensification*.

...not only a lengthening of working hours, but also as a saturation of time, a speeding up of pace and rhythm, tighter deadlines, higher pressure, and sometimes a ‘colonisation’ of the other spheres of the individual’s life. (Krings et al., 2009: 37)

In some cases, this is experienced as continuous round-the-clock pressure. In other cases, intensification takes the form of expecting workers to add new tasks to their existing core activities, a concept they refer to as ‘skill intensification’, as opposed to a simple upskilling.

First, the new competences required from occupational groups involved in restructuring are not necessarily related to the core of their profession, but rather seem to concern ‘side’ skills such as social skills, problem solving skills and resource management skills. Hence, these new competences come on top of the existing professional requirements and may even push aside the further development of the core professional skills. Second, ‘upskilling’ is often related to a considerable work intensification and an enlargement of the skills that the employees need: ...to understand and combine very different types of knowledge and the required speed to process and apply a lot of information in a short time. (Ramioul and De Vroom, 2009: 85)

Work intensification is particularly noticeable in project-based work. In R&D², for instance, there has been a sharp increase in orientation towards markets, with ‘pure’ research increasingly being ousted by research that can be readily brought to market (Valenduc et al., 2007: 54), exposing workers to direct pressures from the market, experienced as tight deadlines. In general, the regulation of work has increasingly shifted from one based on working time to one based on ‘work done’ (Krings et al., 2009: 30).

Linked to this intensification of work is a general *speed-up* of its pace. Sometimes this is the result of a general drive to improve efficiency or competitiveness but often it is a response to market pressure. In the fashion industry, for instance, ‘the most conspicuous feature is the overall acceleration of business activities and workflows. Across the industry, the traditional pattern of seasonal collections has dissolved, and collections are continuously modified and updated... retailers and distributors demand increasingly rapid responses’ (Flecker et al., 2008: 24).

This is exacerbated by the global division of labour in the industry. The longer it takes for finished products to be transported (for instance, by boat, from Asia) the less time is available for creative work. As Krings et al. put it: ‘the consequence of this development is a dramatic reduction of the time required for production and of the time available for inspiration, creation and innovation’ (2009: 30).

According to the interviewees³, time pressure leads to an impoverishment of creativity for designers. Moreover, checking and improving stages of design are shorter and shorter, and sometimes simply removed, leading to more stress... It can also lead to dissatisfaction related to a loss of control over the results of their own work, particularly because the results of their work play a crucial role in their self-fulfilment and are essential for the expression of their own subjectivity. (Valenduc et al., 2007: 41)

A third striking transversal trend is that of *standardisation*. In R&D, for instance, there is:

a growing formalisation and standardisation of the tasks in view of facilitating communication along the value chain. However, this does not mean that tasks are necessarily becoming simpler. The use of project management tools and more documentation of the work are examples of such formalisation that originally applied to market-related and commissioned research projects but are then increasingly transferred to all the work of the unit. (Ramioul and De Vroom, 2009: 45)

For software development professionals:

Standardisation transforms pieces of tacit knowledge into codified knowledge... [It] also concerns the relationships with customers and is linked to the quality criteria laid down in the Service Level Agreement (SLA) ... Many interviewees perceive standardisation as a threat to their own expertise.

2 For the ‘occupational case studies’ on R&D in the IT industry, four case studies were carried out, in Norway, Austria, Germany and France, each involving 7-10 interviews. These complemented ‘organisational case studies’ of value chain restructuring in the industry.

3 For the ‘occupational case studies’ of fashion designers, interviews were carried out in France, Germany and Portugal with 22 designers in nine firms, of whom 17 were women and five men, aged between 27 and 53.

Expertise becomes easily transferred or shared, and specialists become more interchangeable. (Valenduc et al., 2007: 86)

The fashion designers we interviewed also complained of the ways in which trends towards standardisation were reducing their scope for creativity. In some cases this was linked to the increasing requirement to use image processing software packages and to make use of standardised component modules. One German described how the modular construction system they were forced to use meant that pockets always had to be the same standard shape, ‘and that’s something that we designers do very, very reluctantly’. A French designer spoke of the work becoming ‘industrial’ and losing its creativity (quoted in Valenduc et al., 2007: 38).

Standardisation is a prerequisite for outsourcing and relocation but, once it has taken place, it can also make it easier for further outsourcing and relocation to take place in a recursive process that can be described as a ‘snowball effect’ (Ramioul and Huws, 2009). However managers often underestimate the amount of tacit knowledge that is required to enable supposedly standardised systems to operate smoothly. In order to get the job done, workers have to bring into play creativity, skills and knowledge for which they are not credited or rewarded. This sometimes results in an unseen slippage of tasks from ‘knowledge workers’ to others, further down the chain.

Increased demands on documentation and standardised procedure render knowledge explicit but get in the way of actual, situated problem-solving and longer-term creative vision as they cut into the time and discretion workers have available for both aspects of innovation... Standardisation and new demands on tacit knowledge are interrelated, and put on workers (and their ad hoc functional flexibility and tacit skills) an additional demand in both innovative business functions and the less-than-knowledge-intensive areas. Especially there, in the face of Taylorist standardisation, the remaining and increased demands on knowledge tend to be invisible and underrated, specifically when newly imposed routines get in the way of competent work performance. (Flecker et al., 2009: 94)

Intensification, speed-up and standardisation of work are three of the most universal trends accompanying global value chain restructuring. There are many other trends that affect knowledge-intensive work some of which are more specific to particular industries or occupational groups. These include: an increasing requirement to work in response to customer demands, whether these are embodied in contracts or more *ad hoc*, and to absorb the impact of customer dissatisfaction; an increasing requirement to be available round-the-clock, to communicate with workers or clients in other time-zones and to use global languages (especially English); a need to exercise communications and emotional skills on top of their ‘core’ expertise; an increased likelihood of having to work to targets or performance indicators; the introduction of new forms of monitoring and control; pooling of specialist knowledge into broader databases, leading to the development of two-tier structures with a small number of specialists and a larger number of increasingly interchangeable generic workers; bundling of services into standardised marketable products; externalisation of labour to service users, for instance via self-service websites; and a general casualisation of

employment relationships with a ‘just-in-time’ approach to staffing that puts the entire workforce under continual stress⁴.

Control and autonomy in creative work

As already noted, in contemporary capitalism, there is no single standard form of relationship between creative workers and those who pay for their work. They may be paid a salary, a fee, a commission, a royalty or a lump sum for what they produce. They may be employees, independent entrepreneurs, freelancers, partners, franchisers or day labourers. Just as there are multiple forms of contractual relationship, there are multiple forms of control. And, to make things even more complicated, these forms of control are not necessarily single or stable; several may co-exist alongside each other, and one may transmute into another. Global value chain restructuring often involves changing patterns of overall governance and, within these, shifting power relationships between different units along the chain. The impact of the changing relationships of control between these units is experienced on particular sites as a change in the style of management and the degree of coercion exerted by managers over the local workforce (Huws et al., 2009).

As Damarin has observed, ‘there is no clear consensus on how control operates or what autonomy looks like in post-industrial settings’ (2010: 1). Empirical observation throws up a number of different distinctive types, each of which, however, is modified by a number of contextual factors including national culture and tradition, gender relations and factors specific to a particular firm or sector.

One of these types is *personal* control exercised through relationships and obligations between known individuals. This could be a paternalistic form of control exercised through family relationships, for instance in the setting of a family firm, or it could be a more individual form of patronage like that of an aristocrat for a favourite artist. It might be thought that such forms of control are increasingly anachronistic, edged out on the one hand by equal opportunities recruitment and promotion policies and on the other by the impersonal nature of the standardised procedures adopted by global companies for quality-control purposes as well as by public bodies for bureaucratic reasons. Caricatured in the Hollywood ‘casting couch’ stereotype, this form of control has been associated for many years with the entertainment industries. The increasing precariousness of labour markets in these and other ‘creative’ industries means that it still thrives, encouraged by such practices as the provision of work experience through unpaid internships to keen young creative hopefuls. This form of control is bolstered by gift relationships, the mutual exchange of ‘favours’ and a complicity in ignoring the formal terms of contracts. It can not only lead subordinated creative workers into situations that are highly exploitative but can also make it impossible to seek recourse if the relationship breaks down. It may also be associated with forms of sexual predation or harassment. The forms of resistance to this type of control that are open to workers

4 There is no space to do more than list these here. Readers who are interested in finding out more can find a number of relevant articles in *Work Organisation, Labour and Globalisation*, which can be accessed online at [<http://analytica.metapress.com>].

are individual and informal: outmanoeuvring the boss, using personal charm or manipulation, using gossip networks to shame and blame, or simply walking away.

A second type of control is *bureaucratic*. This form is exercised through formal and explicit rules, often negotiated with trade unions. It has traditionally been the dominant form not only in the public sector but also in other large organisations, such as banks. It is associated with hierarchical structures and strict rules of entry, with many of the characteristics of an 'internal labour market' (Doeringer and Piore, 1971). Here the forms of resistance open to workers include subverting the rules, operating them obstructively or obeying them only minimally (as in the form of trade union action known as 'working to rule') or formally challenging them in order to negotiate improvements that are in workers' interests (for instance by reducing agreed working hours, increasing rewards, lengthening rest breaks etc.).

A third type is the sort of *Tayloristic* control anatomised by Braverman (1974). In essence, this involves a system of management (and sometimes also of payment) by results. Targets, or quotas may be set individually or for a whole team. In the latter case, simple instrumental rationality is not the only motive to work: workers' solidarity with team-mates is leveraged as an additional form of motivation. Control may be exerted overtly by a line manager. Or, more insidiously, as Burawoy (1979) observed, it may be internalised and become a form of self-exploitation by complicit workers. In an era when targets may be set by external agents (for instance the client company for outsourced services) or embedded in quality standards or the design of software systems, when much work can be monitored electronically, and when teams are provisional and geographically distributed, Tayloristic systems of control may be hard to pin down, with a high degree of internalisation of control by workers and with the source of power often invisible. The most effective form of resistance to Taylorism takes place prior to its introduction, and involves resistance to standardisation, demands for more varied work, job rotation or the introduction of various forms of job enrichment or 'human-centred design' (Cooley, 1982). These have rarely been achieved outside Scandinavia. Once it has been introduced, apart from out-and-out sabotage, forms of resistance to Tayloristic management include conscious collective efforts by groups of workers to slow down the pace of work in order to gain some time and reduce stress (Beynon, 1975), negotiations over the type and level of targets or performance indicators, and the use of health and safety regulations to try to ensure that stress and speed-up do not reach inhuman levels. Many of these are difficult for creative workers to adopt, because they imply an attitude that inhibits creativity. An interesting case here is that of the Californian employees of the video game company Electronic Arts, who (despite the fact that their work involved producing the audio and video content for the company's games) had to prove that their work was *not* 'creative' in order to win a class action suit against their employer to gain a reduction in working hours (Schumacher, 2006).

A fourth type is control by the *market*. Unless what they have to offer is exceptionally sought-after, self-employed workers and independent producers have little choice but to offer what their customers want, at the price they are prepared to pay, in the face of competition which, in many industries, is increasingly global. Whilst there may be some scope for individual negotiation in some circumstances, the main form of resistance

here lies in the creation of professional associations, guilds or trade unions in which suppliers combine with each other in order to try to set out basic ground rules and avoid undercutting each other in a race to the bottom in which everyone loses. Actors, writers and photographers are examples of groups that have achieved this, to some extent. However in any such grouping there is always a tension between competition and collaboration; between the urge to become a star no matter what the cost, and the compensations of solidarity. Insofar as it is successful, this kind of resistance strategy can lead to another form of control, exercised through the membership of the association, which might be called *peer* or *professional* control. In some cases, self-regulating professional bodies, such as those that represent lawyers and doctors, have succeeded in institutionalising such forms of control with sufficient success to enable them to become embedded in national or even international regulations. With forceful sanctions, including the right to exclude transgressing members from practicing their professions, many such organisations exert considerable power. Even these, however, are currently under threat of modification, if not erosion, from the commodification of knowledge (Huws, 2008; Leys, 2003).

Damarin (2010: 8) argues that within particular industries (her own case study concerned web designers) other, more diffused forms of control exist, which she refers to as ‘socio-technical networks consisting of relationships to persons, technologies, conventions, and typifications’. This conception has some features in common with the concept of ‘communities of practice’ (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Rather than seeing this as a separate form of control, I prefer to regard it as a striking and insightful characterisation of the complexity of control patterns in creative work in which elements of several of the various forms of control discussed above (and others I have not mentioned) may be brought together in particular configurations in specific regional, cultural and industrial contexts.

The management of creative workers is widely recognised as a challenge for capital. A recent *Economist* article put it like this:

Managing creativity involves a series of difficult balancing acts: giving people the freedom to come up with new ideas but making sure that they operate within an overall structure, creating a powerful corporate culture but making sure that it is not too stifling. (*Economist*, June 17, 2010)

In practice, this may often mean the coexistence of more than one form of control, involving both sticks and carrots. But, as we have noted, each form of control evokes a different form of resistance. A defensive response that is appropriate to one form of management aggression may be futile or even counter-productive if it is adopted in relation to another. For instance in a situation where workers are obliged to work excessively long hours, invoking an official regulation that limits the working week (an appropriate response in a situation of bureaucratic control) will have little effect if workers are paid only if they meet certain targets (a Tayloristic form of control) or if they believe that they will bring disgrace on their family firm if they leave a job unfinished (a personal form of control) or if they know that their reputation depends on completing it on time (a market form of control).

When several forms of control exist alongside each other, the contradictory pressures on workers seem to be so great that they are often disempowered from adopting any

effective form of resistance. Instead, they may only be able to respond by becoming physically or mentally ill, letting their families take the strain (or abstaining from any form of adult family life altogether – see Steinko, 2006), burning out, dropping out, striking a pose of cynical anomie, indulging in isolated acts of ‘letting off steam’ or sabotage or adopting a ruthless ‘devil take the hindmost’ attitude that may involve trampling on the interests of fellow workers. Developing new forms of collective organisation and resistance is, of course, an alternative option but one that we found rather little evidence for in the WORKS research (but see Mosco and McKercher, 2010, for more positive evidence).

Case study research throws up many examples of such contradictions. For instance, as we have already noted, the standardisation and fragmentation, or ‘modularisation’ (Huws, 2007) of tasks and processes which is a requisite for outsourcing or relocating them requires Tayloristic forms of management. However in order for these fragmented labour processes to be managed seamlessly over time and space and across cultural divides new ‘soft’ skills are also required which require commitment and motivation and cannot be managed Tayloristically.

In discussing the WORKS results, Ramioul and De Vroom (2009: 41) speak of the ‘prisoner’s dilemma’ of knowledge sharing in software production. On the one hand, companies mid-way down the chain want to outsource as many activities as possible to cheaper locations in order to keep their costs down and remain competitive. On the other, they are well aware that their supplier companies, further down, want to ‘move up the chain’ to get higher value contracts. Two companies may thus become clamped together in a relationship that is simultaneously strongly mutually dependent and intensely competitive (if company A passes on too much knowledge to company B it may find itself outbid and bypassed altogether when the contract comes up for renewal). Similar dilemmas can arise when individuals are thrust temporarily together in a team: on this project, they need each other’s trust and collaboration; on the next, they may be locked in deadly competition.

D’Cruz and Noronha (2009) describe a case in an Indian call centre where the very tight targets are set by client organisations in Service Level Agreements (SLAs). Local management, whilst exerting such strict control that the authors regard it as ‘depersonalised bullying’, nevertheless manage to escape the consequences of this, at least in the form of any direct resistance by the workforce. By blaming the external clients, appealing to their workers’ loyalty to the national back office processing (BPO) industry and inculcating an idea of themselves as ‘professionals’, these managers have succeeded in demonising trade unions, deflecting direct hostility to themselves and persuading the workforce to internalise many of the control mechanisms that push them to reach their targets. The build-up of pressure, however, is so extreme that the workers have to resort to occasional acts of sabotage as a way of ‘letting off steam’.

Another case study illustrates the contradictions that arise when restructuring substitutes one type of management for another. Bramming, Sørensen and Hasle (2009) studied the reorganisation of the Danish tax system, whereby a number of specialised professional tax experts, who had previously been employed by different national and local government department under civil-service-type forms of management, were

transformed into a large centralised pool of more or less generic tax advisors giving information to the public by telephone and email in a call-centre organisational model. Although softened by the context, which was one of active collaboration between the trade union and the management to ensure a transition that did not do too much violence to their professional norms, this was essentially a substitution of a Tayloristic form of management for a bureaucratic one. Collectively, these workers, who typically had a long-term loyalty to their employers, had built up a large body of knowledge (sometimes in part tacit) over many years. Pooling this knowledge in shared databases and introducing Tayloristic forms of control appeared to be quite successful in the short term. However it raised big questions about how the knowledge could be updated in the future. With all their working time spent either in meetings or on the phone to customers, staff did not have a chance to update their knowledge; and the higher staff turnover and flexible work practices associated with the new form of organisation meant that new recruits were likely to be much less knowledgeable than the workers they replaced. Short-term gains for the organisation could lead to serious problems in the future.

Such examples could be multiplied. I hope I have presented enough evidence to demonstrate that the interaction between different management drives for control does not only create near-paralysing contradictions for creative workers, but also creates contradictions for management itself.

Conclusions

We can conclude that, for capital, there is a contradiction between, on the one hand, the need for a continuous (but dispensable) supply of new ideas and talent in order to fuel its accumulation process and, on the other, the need to control these processes tightly in order to maximise efficiency and profit and to appropriate the intellectual property so that companies are able to trade freely in the resulting commodities. On the side of labour, there is the urge by individual workers to do something meaningful in life, to make a mark on the world, to be recognised and appreciated and respected, on the one hand, and, on the other, the need for a subsistence income, the ability to plan ahead and some spare time to spend with loved ones. This is often expressed as a contradiction between a drive for autonomy and a search for security. These contradictions are played out against each other in a complex dance in which different forms of managerial control give rise to (or bypass) different forms of resistance by workers. New twists in the organisation of global value chains are constantly confronting workers with new shocks and surprises, even – or perhaps especially – those who have in the past regarded themselves as skilled and specialist enough to have a strong bargaining position. Meanwhile, unexpected new ideas from labour could pose new risks to management. (Who, for instance, 20 years ago, could have predicted the ways in which Indian software engineers are able to use the Internet to inform themselves of global rates of pay for the work they are doing and use this to their advantage in the global labour market?)

With multiple forms of employment relationship and multiple types of relationship to intellectual property there is no single, simple way to characterise the relationship

between creative labour and capital. This very heterogeneity, and the many contradictions it gives rise to, could, however constitute as much of a strength as a weakness – to either side. Perhaps it is time for creative workers to invest some of their creativity in finding ways to exploit these contradictions.

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