



Geographies of production II: fashion, creativity and fragmented labour

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I Introduction

In a 2006 review essay, Hadjimichalis suggests that economic geographers' current interests in factors such as knowledge, social capital, trust and reciprocity have obscured understandings of the contemporary capitalist space-economy:

Even among writers of the Left, the well-being of workers and local residents has been replaced by a discourse that talks exclusively of the well-being of firms and regions (Hadjimichalis, 2006: 700)

In a similar vein Hadjimichalis and Hudson (2006) contend that particularly within regional development circles interest in 'networked relationships' has drawn attention away from 'asymmetric power structures, exclusion and lack of accountability' in favour of a focus upon 'the efficiency, adaptability and flexibility of networked forms, assuming self-organization and collaborative forms of action' (2006: 868, 869; see also Christopherson and Clark, 2007).

In this second of three reviews, I want to reflect upon the extent to which unequal

power relations are considered within a range of recent work, with the particular purpose of foregrounding assessments of the position of labour. I begin by examining accounts of the geographies of fashion and clothing production. Early exponents of a 'fashion system' approach, Fine and Leopold (1993: 93) emphasized that fashion was somewhat of a 'hybrid subject': research on, for example, the dynamics of clothing production often appeared to be segregated from studies of fashion as a cultural phenomenon. More recently, growing emphasis on its 'design-intensive' nature has led the fashion industry increasingly to be considered, in both academic and policy circles, as a key component of the creative and cultural industries more generally (DCMS, 1998; Scott, 2001; McRobbie, 2004; Evans and Smith, 2006). Yet the work of fashion production – including design work as well as manufacture – continues to be labour-intensive, low-paid and often relatively insecure.

In the second section, I consider some of the recent literature on creative industries, once again with the explicit intent of

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foregrounding the position of creative workers. Ironically enough, although the extent and nature of 'the creative class' has been heavily debated (Florida, 2002; 2005a; 2005b; cf. Peck, 2005; Markusen, 2006), there has been relatively little detailed consideration of the experiences and conditions of workers in creative sectors. Nonetheless, it is beginning to become apparent that self-employment and non-traditional work patterns in the creative industries can place increasing pressure on social and familial relationships and the organization of daily life. In the final section of the report, I approach the issue of links between home and work life through a survey of recent accounts of low-wage and migrant workers.

II Producing fashion

Interest in the geographies of fashion and clothing production shows no signs of abating. In part, of course, the clothing/apparel/fashion industries continue to attract attention because of the fascinating global dynamism in networks of production, with commentators initially drawing inspiration from Fröbel *et al.*'s (1980) early study of transformations in the former West German textile and garment industry. A more recent – and again highly familiar – point of conceptual departure was provided by Gereffi's (1994) distinction between buyer-driven and supplier-driven commodity chains, leading commentators to regard the textile and apparel industry as an archetypical example of the former category. Within the last few years, geographers have begun to situate narratives of clothing production within wider networks, positioning fashion as an 'aesthetically based industry' (Hauge, 2007: 14).

Part of the explanation for sustained interest in clothing and apparel production may well relate to the industry's important economic role within many countries, particularly as an employer (Tewari, 2006: 2325). Having said that, the specific position of labour within global networks of production has tended to receive less attention within recent narratives in comparison with, for

example, analyses of production organization (Hassler, 2005), state policies and regulatory practices (Pickles, 2006; Tewari, 2006; Thomsen, 2007) or more generalized accounts of firm upgrading (Neidik and Gereffi, 2006; Pickles *et al.*, 2006). At a general level, firm upgrading – or 'moving to higher-value activities in global supply chains' (Bair and Gereffi, 2003: 147) – is often implicitly assumed to be beneficial for all involved, including labour. Moving towards more 'design-intensive' production, for example, is generally assumed to be a positive goal for a range of local and national clothing industries (Evans and Smith, 2006; Tokatli, 2007a; 2007b; 2008; Leslie and Brail, 2007). Yet, as Bair and Gereffi (2003: 149) note, 'the upgrading processes of firms in terms of shifts along or between commodity chains is an important, but not a sufficient condition for ensuring positive development outcomes'. In particular, the consequences for workers may not be clear from more general discussions of upgrading at industry level (2003: 149).

Knorringa and Pegler (2006: 474) have argued that if improvements to labour conditions do occur alongside firm upgrading 'they are usually limited to [the] initial phases of insertion in GVCs' (global value chains). Specific groups of skilled workers within certain firms may temporarily benefit, but the more general trend among developing country suppliers is one of downward pressure on wages. Albeit that they do not specifically refer to the clothing/apparel industries, Knorringa and Pegler's (2006) arguments are strongly resonant with van Dooren's (2006) account of jeans production in the Laguna region in Mexico. As the region became more closely drawn into international production networks following the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement, employment in jeans manufacturing increased dramatically. Local producers came under increasing pressure from US buyers to reorganize production in order to achieve higher quality levels and shorter lead times. Although workers saw some improvements in pay, the introduction

of modular production systems acted to fragment the labour force and their work pace was significantly intensified (van Dooren, 2006). Further, even at the height of what transpired to be a short-lived 'boom', garment industry wages did not reach levels which would enable workers to support a household (van Dooren, 2006).

Empirically, accounts of retailer/buyer power in the clothing industries have most often focused upon the production of goods destined for the US market. By contrast, high levels of retail concentration – often seen to signal a power imbalance between retailers and their suppliers – may be relatively less discernible in the European context, although there is some indication of growing retailer power in France and Spain (Palpacuer, 2006; Tokatli, 2008). Once again, it would be interesting to learn more about the explicit implications of such patterns for labour terms and conditions. Tokatli's (2008) discussion of the Spanish retailer Zara, for example, is suggestive: she notes that the retention of 'fashion-oriented' production within western Europe in the early 2000s relied upon low-wage suppliers in Galicia and northern Portugal. Citing *Forbes* magazine, Tokatli reports that 'seamstresses ... received something less than half the average industrial wage' and that firms may well have employed staff 'off the books' – ie, without paying social security premiums and taxes (2008: 32). More recently, Zara has turned to source 'complicated and highly tailored fast fashion items' from 'upgraded' suppliers in Morocco, Bulgaria and Turkey, as well as relying upon a range of low cost south east Asian firms (Tokatli, 2008: 35). Thus while the use of proximate, market-responsive European suppliers initially might have been viewed as a more positive – or at least an alternative – strategy to outsourcing to 'cheap labour locations', in hindsight it seems somewhat naïve to have assumed that the production of high-quality, high-fashion clothing would necessarily involve the employment of well-remunerated labour (Tokatli, 2008).

Interest in 'the extent to which firms have been able to upgrade production into higher value and more "creative" design-oriented activity' (Evans and Smith, 2006: 2254, emphasis added) has drawn analysts of the fashion and clothing industries into debates surrounding the relative importance of the cultural and creative industries. For some authors, fashion is seen as the quintessential example (among cultural product industries) of the influence of aesthetic, semiotic or 'semaphoric' value and content (Santagata, 2004). In the context of a study of Australian Fashion Week, Weller (2008) positions fashion as a 'cultural commodity', located within value flows which cross-cut garment production, fashion shows and fashion image (video and photography) production. Hauge (2007) emphasizes the importance of symbolic and 'immaterial' value in Swedish fashion production; while Larner *et al.* (2007) critically evaluate the positioning of the New Zealand 'designer fashion industry' as having the potential to revamp the nation's 'international image ... and thus to foster additional international investment' (2007: 381).

III Producing creativity: creative labour

Accounts of the geographies of creative production have been – in the main – pre-occupied with processes of clustering and firm agglomeration, with the nature of knowledge flows and with the organizational implications of networking and project working across increasingly porous firm boundaries (for reviews, see Gibson and Kong, 2005; Reimer *et al.*, 2008). Emergent understandings of cultural and creative economies have been less directly concerned with labour as a main focus of analysis.¹ Clearly, the presence or absence of a 'creative class' is taken – by some – to be a de facto measure of the creative economy (Florida, 2002), yet analysts seem to have been relatively less interested in the actual terms and conditions of employment within creative sectors. Florida's critics have raised questions about the nature of creative work:

the Creative Class seek out tolerant, diverse and open communities, rich in the kind of amenities that allow them precariously to maintain a work-life balance, together with experiential intensity, in the context of ... demanding work schedules. (Peck, 2005: 745)

However, as Rantisi *et al.* (2006: 1795) note in a guest editorial to a special issue on the creative economy, 'although many of the papers provide insight into labour processes in the new creative economy, the opportunities and challenges that workers confront merit further analysis' (see also Scott, 2007).

Some commentators have been sharply critical of terms and conditions of labour across the creative industries. Drawing upon observations of the British context, McRobbie (2002; 2004) and Oakley (2004; 2006) have been particularly concerned about the impact of the sector's dependency upon 'network sociality'. Precisely because – as is often suggested – access to social networks determines entry into and advancement within creative sectors, unequal power relations have the potential to create sharp patterns of labour market exclusion and division (Oakley, 2006: 265). Highly rewarded key 'creative' individuals are disconnected from a large aspiring pool of lower-earning, often self-employed workers (Oakley, 2004; see also McRobbie, 1998). In the UK it is notable that the creative and cultural industries workforce is predominantly white (Oakley, 2006: 264). While gender divisions across all subsector groupings may be 'less stark', women form a minority in advertising and design, for example (Oakley, 2006; see also Design Council, 2005). Within the film production workforce, women are concentrated within lower-paying occupational groups – and also receive lower levels of remuneration 'than men in equivalent age and occupation brackets' (Oakley, 2006: 264, emphasis in original).

For Markusen (2006), such disaggregation of the 'creative class' matters because specific groups of workers may well have different characteristics and play different roles within cities. Her work on artistic communities in

the United States – including performing artists, musicians, writers and visual artists – provides a useful window onto a largely understudied group of workers within the creative sector (Markusen, 2006; Markusen and Schrock, 2006). In contrast to Florida's 'super-creative core', who 'disproportionately work and live in suburbs where homogeneity and low density are highly valued', artists are likely to be relatively less affluent; may have more diverse ethnic backgrounds; and play 'more active roles in their neighbourhoods' (Markusen, 2006: 1923, 1937).

Although the consequences of project-based working for firms and industries have been of central concern to many analysts of the creative and cultural sectors, the impact upon labour has been less fully explored. By their very nature, of course, projects are temporary systems, positioning many workers within highly insecure labour market structures, both over the short and long term. New media and design work is seen to be characteristic in this regard (Christopherson, 2004; 2006; Perrons, 2004; Damarin, 2006; Vinodrai, 2006). On a month-to-month basis individuals must utilize skills acquired individually and draw upon personal networks in order to 'get by'; while through their working lifespan project workers 'have unclear career paths' (Christopherson, 2004: 546).

While some analysts have tended to emphasize the self-reflexivity involved in the cultural industries, highlighting the individual choices and life project management possibilities afforded to the creative entrepreneur (Bank *et al.*, 2000; Allen, 2007), others are less sanguine about the potentially progressive nature of creative work. As McRobbie (2002: 526) has argued, 'there is an irony in that alongside the assumed openness of the [creative] network, the apparent embrace of non-hierarchical working practices, the various flows and fluidities ... there are quite rigid closures and exclusions'. Nixon and Crewe (2004) emphasize that precisely because the creative industries have been held up as positive models for work and employment

– not least within policy circles – it is important to disrupt such narratives. Their account of UK magazine and advertising workers, for example, outlines the troubling extent to which ‘strident forms of masculinity and homosociability’ had become a central part of work cultures in these creative industries (2004: 143).

The predominant focus of accounts of the creative and cultural industries upon the US and UK context might not, perhaps, be surprising (see Kong *et al.*, 2006). In this light it is interesting to discover that that one of the apparently exemplary characteristics of the creative industries – project working – does not always and everywhere denote unstable and short-term employment: ‘in Sweden and Germany, by contrast, new media employees tend to be full-time employees and to work under longer-term employment contracts even when they are working on projects’ (Christopherson, 2004: 555; see also Dahlström and Hermelin, 2007). Geographies of creative production thus can be seen to be shaped by regulatory and governance systems at the national level – including the relative responsibilities of labour and employers for skill development and industry sustainability.

Implicit in many mentions of the ‘long hours culture’ (McRobbie, 2002: 526) of the creative and cultural sectors is the suggestion that such working practices are inimical to the functioning of relationships which may stand outside paid employment – such as the family. Jarvis and Pratt (2006) take such a situation as the central focus of their study of San Francisco households engaged in new media work. They emphasize what they call the ‘hidden costs of extensification’ – that is, the spatial and temporal overflowing of work into and out of the household. Within a sector that frequently requires workers to be ‘always on’, Jarvis and Pratt (2006) illuminate the difficulties posed for dual-income households in seeking to manage the social and economic obligations of working and domestic lives.

IV Low-paid work and migrant labour

Feminist geographical work has of course argued for some time that a reconceptualization of what historically have been held to be separate categories – work and home – is essential to understanding the geographies of production and labour markets (Hanson and Pratt, 1995; McDowell, 2001; 2006; McDowell *et al.*, 2006a). While Jarvis and Pratt’s (2006) analysis draws together the relationships between production and reproduction for ‘apparently secure workers’ (p. 338), other commentators have foregrounded the lives of working-class households. In a study of Wythenshawe, South Manchester, Ward *et al.*’s (2007) interviewees predominantly formed part of ‘dual low-income and one and a half low-income households’ (p. 323).² Paralleling patterns within advanced industrial economies more broadly (McDowell, 2006: 829), responsibilities for social reproduction were undertaken predominantly by mothers who worked ‘medium-to-long part-time hours’ (Ward *et al.*, 2007: 323).

Ward and colleagues (2007) make an important political point regarding the position of low-paid workers within contemporary economies and societies more generally. They suggest that while an oft-cited shift to ‘knowledge work’ – including employment in the creative and cultural sectors identified above – has been the focus of much attention it is in fact the labour of ‘less glamorous’ households:

that makes urban economies function. [Such labour includes the work of] the security guards protecting the refurbished finance firms in revitalized urban cores; the cleaners dusting the offices of the web designers whose work is celebrated in narratives in ‘local’ ‘cultural’ economies; the carers for the parents and the children of the well-paid accountants and lawyers of city-centre firms. (Ward *et al.*, 2007: 313)

Such an argument resonates strongly with another collaborative research project focusing upon low-paid workers in London

(May *et al.*, 2007; Datta *et al.*, 2007). A stark divide has emerged between high-earning Londoners and 'a new 'reserve army of labour' ... a significant part of which consists of foreign-born workers' (May *et al.*, 2007: 153). At one level this division might appear to parallel older accounts of the dynamics of 'global cities' (eg, Sassen, 1991) in which the need for 'servicing work' was seen to be concomitant with the growth of producer services and the expansion of elite workers in managerial and professional jobs. However, May and colleagues assert that London's low-paid workers – who now are predominantly a migrant labour force – play a crucial role 'in keeping *the city as a whole* "working"' (2007: 161, emphasis added). The employment status of low-paid migrant labour was not informal: 86% of surveyed workers had written contracts of employment; 95% received pay slips and 94% paid tax and National Insurance contributions, further emphasizing the centrality – rather than marginality – of such women and men to London's economy (May *et al.*, 2007).

In a companion paper, Datta *et al.* (2007) reflect upon the ways in which low-paid migrant workers in London seek to 'get by' at an individual and household level. Again, the necessity of drawing connections between production and reproduction is emphasized in stories of workers' experiences in 'dealing with labour market segmentation, changing household economies and social exclusion' (2007: 409). Alongside practices such as multiple job-holding, informal child-care arrangements and tight household budgeting, many migrants also were required to share housing with others, predominantly outside their family group. Given the extraordinarily high cost of housing in London, the latter point is highly suggestive of the need to hold together in analysis the entwined associations connecting work, home and local community. Further, global flows of remittances can be seen to shape geographies of production and reproduction across increasingly diverse spatial scales. Perhaps

one of the most notable experiences was the relatively high number of migrants (39% of surveyed workers) who had dependent children living abroad (Datta *et al.*, 2007). The circumstances which appear to have compelled such parenting at a distance clearly raise important ethical questions for us all: as May *et al.* (2007) suggest, 'London's labour market is now more obviously than ever shaped by the opportunities that do or do not exist for making a living and a life in Lesotho and Lithuania' (p. 163).

It is striking how many different metaphors are deployed in attempts to capture the ways in which women and men seek to sustain themselves and their families in the context of downward pressures on pay; increasingly constrained time schedules (related, for example, to difficulties of transport or working schedules), and/or the demands of both waged and unwaged work. One of the most persistent has been the notion of 'getting by', perhaps best known since its use by sociologist Ray Pahl (1984) over two decades ago. Ward *et al.* (2007) write of 'a constrained juggling act' (p. 319) and of the 'choreography of everyday activities' (p. 323) performed by households. Datta *et al.* (2007: 405, 409) suggest that existing literature on 'coping strategies' might be reworked to consider households' efforts as 'tactics', drawing upon Williams (2006) use of de Certeau (1984).

At times, metaphors can appear as commonsense, 'it just happens' analogies, which may potentially have the effect of naturalizing and normalizing households' responses. While the notion that, for example, 'we just do what we can' acceptably reflects the sentiments of interviewees, it may be necessary for researchers to build sharper critiques into their accounts. That is, characterizations of 'coping' or 'getting by' may be insufficiently forceful in arguing for circumstances under which workers' lives could be made better. Datta *et al.* emphasize, for example, that migrant workers' 'tactics' are often 'reactive, fragmented and fragile' (2007: 425). It may be strategically important to seek to denaturalize

terminology such as 'getting by' – particularly in order to make political arguments for change.

Notes

1. For reasons of brevity in a short report of this nature I deliberately sidestep debates about the distinction between cultural and creative industries (cf. Hesmondhalgh and Pratt, 2005).
2. Further work from this collaborative research project, which also examines the management of work and childcare responsibilities among middle-class households, can be found in McDowell *et al.*, 2006a; 2006b).

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