Creative Labour, Before and After 'Going Freelance': Contextual Factors and Coalition-Building Practices

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Introduction

The work that takes place in design and other creative industries possesses many of the characteristics of what thinkers in the Italian postoperaist tradition call 'immaterial labour' (Lazzarato, 1996). For these thinkers (e.g. Hardt & Negri, 2004: 107–109), immaterial labour is the 'new normal' of contemporary work insofar as it holds a 'hegemonic'—and not necessarily numerical—dominance within capitalist production akin to the position of factory labour at the time Marx was writing his *Capital* (1990). Postoperaists suggest that the spontaneous, autonomous and ephemeral creativity of this labour causes a crisis in the capacity of capitalism to measure work and the value it creates, inspiring a revolutionary vision of a postcapitalist or postwork future incipient within the present.

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This immaterial labour is exemplified by creative labour in the creative industries and also creativity as more broadly valorised in the 'gig' or 'sharing' economies. By illustrating the trends and tendencies ascribed to immaterial labour, work in the creative industries epitomises employment transformations on which the future is said to hinge. In a study of creative workers presented here, I will specifically look at freelancing—an increasingly common form of work (ILO, 2015)—in order to critically reflect on and contest some of these claims made about immaterial labour. In particular, I will focus on freelancers working in graphic design, branding, and advertising.

The kind of work that takes place in design, branding and advertising is specifically celebrated as an archetypal example of immaterial labour (Fumagalli, 2011, cf. Pitts, 2015a). It manipulates symbols and attaches meaning to goods and services in pursuit of commodity exchange. Due to its reliance upon ephemeral and unquantifiable qualities, such as creativity, communication and cognition, theorists of immaterial production including Hardt and Negri (2001) have suggested that this kind of labour and the value that it creates are essentially immeasurable and pose the possibility of capitalism's collapse and overthrow (see Pitts, 2016a for a critique). In its association with this immaterial character, creative labour is cast as self-organised and self-valorising, and productive beyond the capacity of capital to capture it.

This chapter will contest this ascription of immanent self-organisation and self-valorisation by situating freelance creative work within a situation of struggle in which institutional factors influence the movement from formal to freelance employment and, by degrees, constrain and control the creativity of those involved. Examination of these contextual factors highlights a criticism that I have made elsewhere of the postoperaist approach to immaterial labour (Pitts, 2016b). This is that thinkers in this tradition extrapolate from microscopic changes in how we work to wider changes in capitalism as a whole. I argue that this takes a myopic stance with reference to labour, seeing it entirely apart from its imbrication in wider social relations and social forms that both precondition the labour process and ultimately arbitrate its results in the sphere of exchange. Market-mediated factors bear as much determination over the form of

work as the purportedly immanent desires of workers themselves—and around this tensions and conflicts circulate, the practical responses to which I explore later in the chapter.

Theoretical foundations

This chapter comes at an interesting time when the celebration of labour's spontaneous productiveness and the unencumbered 'creativity of desire' we find in Hardt and Negri dovetails with some of the same ideas through which capital understands itself in popular discourse around the creative economy. We see a fresh uptake of the same ideas in the present day, with a number of bestselling books using a similar perspective to sell radical ideas in rational forms to policymakers around the post-work potential of the 'gig' or 'sharing' economies and the move to a supposed postcapitalist society, the beginnings of which co-exist within the shell of the present (e.g. Mason, 2015, cf. Pitts, 2015b). By examining the claims made in the contested literature of postoperaismo and its forerunner, operaismo, about changes in labour and the forms of class composition and conflict they imply, we can illuminate the assumptions that undergird a growing uptake of these ideas in the spheres of politics, policymaking and popular debate (Dinerstein, Taylor, & Pitts, 2016).

The postoperaist approach of Hardt and Negri, among others, differentiates itself from the early operaismo of its adherents by seeing liberation arising not from an antagonistic relationship with labour but through that labour itself. By seeing labour under capitalism sowing the seeds of its own liberation, every development in capitalism is met with an unremitting positivity (see Pitts, 2016b). Operaismo, however, is more circumspect, its theoretical influence having long passed over, continuities outweighed by discontinuities, into postoperaismo. An operaist analysis of changes in labour relevant to this piece still circulates, however, and has recently been applied to freelancers by one of the founding fathers of the movement, Sergio Bologna (2007; Bologna & Banfi, 2011). It is this application we will draw upon here. This work lay untranslated into English at the time of writing, with the publication of a monograph

forthcoming (Bologna, 2017). As such, the English translation cannot be fully taken account of in this chapter, which relies instead on the translated passages given in Marco Boffo's excellent introduction to the works in *Historical Materialism* journal (2014). Bologna gives a brief account, in English, of the origins of the work in a recent chapter, but little substantial detail (2013).

As Boffo (2014: 428) outlines, in his most recent work, Bologna, a flagbearer for the more antagonistic politics of operaismo, 'debunks the proclamations of a new organisation of capitalism […] characterised by greater freedom and autonomy for workers' found in the work of Negri and other postoperaists. He does so though a focus on 'second-generation autonomous work' by which it is meant self-employed and freelance labour falling under a specific set of juridical relationships (Boffo, 2014: 429). The revolutionary 'novelty' attached to supposedly new ways of working by theorists like Negri, Bologna's analysis suggests, ignores the specific nature of the 'constraints and opportunities faced by the second-generation autonomous work-force in the processes of self-protection, representation of its own interests, and coalition-building' (Boffo, 2014: 430, cf. Pitts, 2016a). The posing of a 'social worker' engaged in 'immaterial labour' as the key social subject of contemporary capitalism elides how the forms of struggle engaged in by workers still come up against the same factors and forms of action as the earlier 'mass worker', to which, Bologna suggests, the always-already liberated 'immaterial labourer' is posed as an alternative only to conveniently hide from the difficulties associated with traditional modes of mobilisation in a new economy (Boffo, 2014: 428).

The contemporary economy witnesses the institution of contractual flexibility partly owing to an attempt to 'eradicate' the 'conditions for coalition-building' among workers. But, for Bologna, this flexibility is also itself 'deliberately pursued by workers to safeguard autonomy and independence, and to reconcile working life with care-activities' (Boffo, 2014: 432). This autonomy and independence has, Bologna suggests, led researchers to 'neglect' how coalitions between freelancers are and can be built (Bologna, quoted in Boffo, 2014: 434). Freelancers, treated as independent firms in themselves, enter not into typical contracts of employment but commercial contracts of service provision for a fee and not a wage. With this relationship comes an absence of all the normal benefits

and entitlements, such as sick pay and pensions, that attend a formal contract of employment. Thus, the bases for labour organisation and coalition-buildings are radically different from those experienced by the Fordist worker, for instance. However, for Bologna, analyses of immaterial labour neglect the material and contractual forms into which contemporary workers enter, and the possible grounds for organisation and antagonism they establish (Boffo, 2014: 434). Indeed, we might attribute this to a pervasive optimism that sees the transformations in labour themselves, and the modes of capitalist development they determine, completing the work of human liberation immanently, expressing struggle as a matter of course rather than an external force fighting for it. Here, we explore the potential and actual dimensions of this struggle as it applies to creative labourers in their transitions into and out of freelance working lifestyles, in resistance to rather than compliance with the capitalist determination of their creative work.

In considering struggle, I assume a theoretical position informed by John Holloway's conceptualisation of creativity as 'human doing' denied in the abstract forms of value to which it is subject in capitalist society (2002, 2010; see also Tischler, 2005). Rather than something realised in the present, as both postoperaist accounts and mainstream celebrations like that of Richard Florida (2002) suggest, creativity is seen as something potential but denied, and therefore subject to struggle. This is waged on the part of employers, to control and cajole it to the ends of profit and valorisation, which entails stifling it within reasonable limits, to the point of what Nitzan and Bichler call 'sabotage' (2009).[1] But it is also waged on the part of employees to secure the conditions for the pleasurable and fulfilling exertion of their creative desire even within the rubric of the wage relationship. By following Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2008, 2011) in characterising the work that takes place in the creative industries as 'creative labour', we can highlight the imbrication of creative activity in the context of capitalist valorisation and accumulation, in which we situate it in the first part of the case study below. Looking at it as creative labour allows access to the conflict and struggle that ensues around exploitation and working conditions in the creative industries (Gill & Pratt, 2008; Ross, 2008). Applying this to freelancing, we can see the search for independent working lifestyles as itself a form of struggle to

secure the basis for unalienated creativity, and therefore freelance work as what Nicole Cohen (2012) calls a 'site of struggle' more generally, including at the level of the 'coalition-building' considered in the closing parts of the case study that follows.

The research project

My analysis draws upon data collected over the course of 33 semi-structured interviews with people working in graphic design, branding and advertising agencies in the UK and the Netherlands. Twenty-one of these interviews were with formal employees. Twelve of these interviews are with freelancers. Kuipers (2014) describes interviewing as the 'obvious method for studying cultural intermediaries'. It offers an 'open-ended approach and richer data' than, say, a survey. Furthermore, it allows informants to 'give their own account of their lives and their activities', from which researchers can gauge feelings, meanings and evaluations of life and work. But, moreover, it applies specifically to workers in the creative industries in that the method draws upon 'conversation[s] in which meanings and values are discussed, dissected and co-produced'. My approach sought to provoke the participant into actively engaging with those occasions on which their expectations and self-understandings of their vocation were confounded and upended by workplace practices of measurement, valuation and control, and the alternatives they desired and accessed by means of 'going freelance' and creating new forms of collective activity as independent workers.

Competition and decomposition

A number of contextual factors underlie the movement from formal employment to freelance working arrangements among the creatives interviewing in this study. In turn, the movement itself participates in these processes. The research took place at a time where, as one participant put it, 'the industry has expanded massively' (Interview with designer conducted February 2014). But with this expansion comes added pressures.

Amid intensified competition, there is some evidence of declining fee income in the design sector. Moor and Julier (2009) quote figures which show a long-term decrease in fee income, despite a steady level of designers and design firms over the same period. These figures suggest that, while design firms are becoming more productive due to greater efficiency, quicker turnaround and technological advances, the benefit of this increasing productivity is being passed on to clients rather than felt directly by the companies themselves. As the clients seek to claw what they can from the process, agencies lose out. There was general consensus that, post-recession, clients were more constrained in what they could spend, but expected the same level of service, so that agencies 'end up trying to deliver the same quality of work as people have been doing for the last twenty years', but, owing to the client having less cash to spend, trying to match this standard 'in a much shorter time', said one designer. Companies were merely trying to 'keep up appearances' in any way they could, without the monetary means to do so (Interview with designer conducted February 2014).

As budgetary constraints take hold, agencies swim in a client pool where the room to compete is reducing. This intensifies competition within the creative sector, dovetailing with a handful of other trends in its development. Participants testified to a general fragmentation in the creative industries. Big agencies break down into smaller ones. Employees break away to go independent, either as freelancers or in small enterprises with others. Other employees face redundancy, only to be hired back as freelancers by the same company that sacked them—an upmarket version of full-time staff being moved onto zero-hours contracts. There is a growing specialisation of creative tasks, facilitated by the ability to search for freelancers offering specific creative skills online. Specialisation has accelerated due to the informationalisation of recruitment via the Internet. There are sites 'for freelancers to find work, and for clients to put projects up' (Interview with freelance designer conducted May 2014). This allows further specialisation in the sector, as clients 'can search a massive pool of freelancers and […] find someone who can specialise in what they need' rather than recruit an agency for full-spectrum service. An expansion of the freelance sector expresses the breakdown in company size, as fixed staff decrease in favour of a

constantly circulating satellite workforce that service the constellation of small firms in the sector. As a result, there are 'not many' big agencies left (Interview with freelance designer conducted July 2014). They are getting 'smaller and 'smaller'.

The proliferation of agencies, studios and freelancers that occurs by virtue of this fragmentation creates an added burden of competition in the sector, specifically for those medium-sized firms who find themselves squeezed between the big shareholder-owned corporates and one-man-bands working with loose networks of freelancers attracting work through the web with few other overheads. The same participant explained this dynamic thus:

> there's a lot of squabbling over the scraps at the very bottom, so you've got one or two man studios doing the odd bits because you know their overheads are low, they're able to hit some of these clients and also they're winning some quite good ones because they'll go to the biggest studios, who've got massive overheads, and they're like 'we're eighty pounds an hour', well, the guy down there can do it for twenty pounds an hour, and the guy down there's still making a profit because he's just in his bedroom, um, so it gets difficult […].

The added competitiveness produced by this tendency towards fragmentation in the sector induced agencies to sell themselves short seeking work, by pitching lower than a job will cost in order to secure projects from potential clients, or overdelivering on an agreed budget at a loss to keep a client for future work. As we shall see, this is a crucial influence in creating the kind of negative working conditions creatives seek to escape in 'going freelance'.

The imperative to overdeliver is fuelled by the rate of unsuccessful pitches, which is high for a variety of reasons. In a constrained economic climate where competition between firms for scarce business is intense, clients are cagey about the budget they are working with. As a designer at Company 1 told me, agencies will 'work up a scheme' for work totalling £20,000, only to find the company has half that to spend (Interview with designer conducted January 2014). But, moreover, in a competitive

sector, there is a finite amount of work to go around, and the entry of lower-cost design solutions through the Internet-driven 'gig economy' has made it easier for established agencies to be undercut. In an economic climate where companies across the board are seeking to cut costs, potential clients will use the pitch as a chance to gather ideas from more skilled and expensive firms only to redistribute the insights their pitches contain to lower-cost agencies able to implement the concepts already delivered for free (Interview with Managing Director conducted November 2014). This dovetails, then, with tendencies towards fragmentation and competition, as upstart studios steal work from under the noses of big design firms. Freelancers, and their ability to take scraps of work from bigger studios, are central to this. Ironically, the pressure this puts upon agencies actually motivates employees to seek freelance work as an alternative, as the constraints and pressures at the pitching end make work less pleasurable.

As one designer at Company 4 told me, 'I've seen friends in this industry really be put under pressure for pitches when they have 48 hours to turn around a really ridiculously amazing pitch and they need the work and other agencies are fighting them because they need the work and the budget becomes narrower' (Interview with designer conducted July 2014). The pressures at this end of the process then impinge adversely on the creative labour performed once the plan and price are set in place post-pitch. A creative director at Company 2 explained how, when the company did 'overdeliver for the client in order to get more work out of them in the future', the intensity of work and the extent of working hours would increase, as the agency tried to do as much as they could within the remit of an insufficient budget (Interview with Creative Director conducted March 2014). Interestingly, this situation arises partly because of fragmentation that itself owes to freelancers breaking away from agencies precisely because of these conditions, a contradictory and destructive self-fulfilling prophecy concealed underneath the surface appearance of a mere change in contractual status governed by a legal framework geared towards the sublation of open antagonism. What is in fact the active struggle for unalienated creative activity appears as—in the form of a real appearance—a shift in the legal relationship between equal parties.

The search for freedom

What all this shows is that freelancers participate in a decomposition of the design sector, and take advantage of it to break away, usually tiring of formal employment at agencies and seeking a greater degree of independence and specialisation. Wearying of being asked to subordinate their creative impulses to organisational demands, they escape in order to commit themselves to a specific aspect of their work that they particularly enjoy. In the process, they often sell their services back to the same company that they broke away from, for better pay and a more desirable job specification. The range of tasks they perform narrows, and they are hired on the basis of this specialised knowledge. Meanwhile, the other parts of the more comprehensive array of tasks they completed formerly will be, in theory, picked up by other freelancers making the same move. One participant, for instance, expressed this situation well when he recounted how he first decided to work full-time as a freelancer. Agencies were not recruiting the strategic specialism he offered. It was too specific, and not worth the outlay on a permanent post. As a result, he resolved that he could pick up work on this specific, smaller basis by going freelance and servicing the needs of many creative agencies rather than seeking formal employment with one such agency (Interview with freelance strategist conducted June 2014). Another drew the distinction between his younger self, who 'want[ed] to do everything', and his present self, focused on a narrow specialism. 'For the other things', he said, they can 'ask another freelancer' (Interview with freelance designer conducted June 2014).

The search for freedom here presents itself as a form of resistance against the stultifying effects wrought upon creativity by the quantitative rule of the workplace—even though, as we have seen, and as I show elsewhere (Pitts, 2016c), workers quite often end up subsumed under it once more. The specialisation and fragmentation of the sector sparked by the exodus of formal employees as freelancers has implications for how they organise to secure better conditions for the exertion of the creative activity they have prioritised in going freelance in the first place. By placing freelancers in competition with one another for a series of commercial contracts in a context of market constraints, the building of practical and political solidarity becomes an uphill task.

Competition among freelancers has accelerated due to the informationalisation of recruitment via the Internet. For one participant, the Internet provides a means of extending the search for jobs beyond one's immediate locale (Interview with freelance designer conducted May 2014). There are sites 'for freelancers to find work, and for clients to put projects up'. This allows further specialisation of freelance work, as clients 'can search a massive pool of freelancers and […] find someone who can specialise in what they need'. This specialisation fragments not only the freelance sector but the experience of work among the freelancer community. The variety of different client relationships, working patterns and contractual arrangements introduces considerable internal differentiation and fragmentation with the freelance workforce. Even the career trajectory of one freelancer will feature multiple forms and experiences of work. This fragmentation is exemplified in the different self-understandings of the freelancers in this study. Some freelancers see themselves as a firm or small business. Others collaborate with fellow freelancers in small, temporary teams that constitute mini-businesses in themselves. Many freelancers in the study see themselves as entrepreneurs, with a creative identity forged in many side-projects, all contributing towards an outwardly sellable self. This variation, forged from fragmentation of the freelance workforce through specialisation and competition, makes organising for alternatives very difficult. But, as we see, a growing 'guild' mentality mediates the individual within a loose and shifting network of collectivities.

Coping strategies

A greater degree of competition between freelancers, dovetailing with a wider fragmentation and specialisation of design and design work, makes collective relations much harder. One participant had seen members of his 'network' walk away with 'his' clients after pushing work their way (Interview with freelance designer conducted June 2014). This occurred twice, he said. This exemplifies the level of competition among freelancers for the jobs available. Although most freelancers did not struggle to get work, there is a hierarchy, both of kinds of work in terms of quality and price, and of the freelancers themselves and the type of jobs they can

access. The participant in particular felt the pressure from fellow freelancers who could work for €60 an hour rather than the €100 that he asks. But he considers the latter the value of his work. His conundrum is that, if he drops down to €60 to compete, the next time he works for the client, that will be the going rate. He sells himself on the basis that he costs €100 an hour because what he does is worth €100 an hour. The influx of younger, more eager rookie freelancers into the market exerts this kind of downward pressure on rates, in what becomes, in effect, a race to the bottom that freelancers rely on their profile and prestige to resist. Another participant was moving away from freelance work for this reason. There is a 'bunch of young people willing to do it for less money', and this means 'you can only go so far' (Interview with freelance Creative Director conducted July 2014).

This competitive scenario suggests that the creative will bends itself to money. The freelancer, after all, subsists on a commercial contract rather than a formal contract of employment (Boutang, 2011: 142, 153). This makes open competition a feature of a free market rather than of the employment relationship. In the latter, solidarity is possible. The monopolisation of overtime by one worker in a factory runs up against the need for collective strength against management. But, among freelancers, this collective sensibility runs up against their status as service providers competing in the open market. This subordinates their creative identity to money. Their creative identity expresses itself through a market relation that inhibits their ability to relate to fellow freelancers. Successful attempts to group together via networks, co-working spaces, or professional guilds are achieved in spite of this economic basis.

Networks, professional bodies and co-working spaces constitute coping strategies to deal with the isolation and atomisation of freelance existence. One participant explained that he enjoyed the balance of doing a few days with a client, as it broke up the solitude of working alone and gave 'the benefit of a full-time job' insofar as it felt as if he had 'mates there' (Interview with freelance designer conducted May 2014). For another, getting a freelance stint at an agency was 'like coming home' (Interview with freelance designer conducted June 2014). However, more often than not, this sociality manifests differently than desired. It is common for freelancers to feel like an eternal 'new guy', going from one job

to the next without ever really fitting in. One must connect with the temporary peer group encountered with each job. As the latter participant suggests, it is necessary to build rapport so as to secure future work. But this pressure to connect conflicts with the temporariness of the situation, and the more banal feeling that one does not really want to make friends with every person one sits next to. Put simply, freelancers are forced to be social in ways not of their choosing—a state of affairs familiar to any worker, ultimately. The social rhythm established more autonomously in, say, a co-working space or networking drinks is different to the social rhythm demanded of them in client workplaces. It beats to a different drum.

Alongside the Internet as a tool for connecting with clients, networking is used as a means by which potential jobs are passed around peer groups of freelancers and employees from creative agencies. A cycle of events such as 'network drinks' situate these networks in a face-to-face setting, but one's 'network' is also a more distant, virtual relationship. Participants talk about their 'network' as a vital resource that can be drawn upon and accessed for opportunities and support. It is even spoken of as something that others would be keen to access, but which remains sealed to those involved. In this way it exemplifies something like a guild mentality operating within the freelance community.

This guild mentality expresses itself best in the range of professional groupings the freelancers involved in the study belong to. One is a web platform that brings together freelancers in the Netherlands to promote themselves to potential clients. It is conceived as a collective through which freelancers work together in order to advance themselves as individuals. Similarly, professional associations have sprung up for the different specialisms of the creative professions: strategists, account planners, branding consultants and designers. These offer an opportunity to network and gain advice on pricing, legal matters and copyright issues. One participant chose a professional body not so much for its direct relevancy to their own professional identity, but based on the kinds of job role it represented for other people. It provided an opportunity to meet account planners who would then allocate work for the agencies at which they are employed (Interview with freelance strategist conducted June 2014). 'Networking' with planners can be a lucrative time investment for freelancers.

If they play their cards right, the freelancer will be top of the planner's contact list when the agency is short of staff or they need a last-minute push to meet a deadline.

Here, the brave new world of social media and information and communications technology (ICT) connectivity is no substitute for old-fashioned face-to-face interaction. This demonstrates why freelancers seek out more physical, rather than virtual, means for connecting with one another. One such method is the establishment of co-working spaces with other freelancers. For one participant, co-working spaces 'catalyse [...] creativity' by bringing creatives together (Interview with freelance strategist conducted June 2014). Collectivising is often for professional, guild-style reasons, but here it is in service to creativity itself—as a force nurtured away from, and in the gaps between, the chaotic conditions of the commercial relationship of individual creative freelancers with their client businesses. It operates to a different rhythm. At the co-working spaces freelancers fall into more traditional rhythms. They tend to have lunch together. This differs from agencies, the co-working space providing a structure more attuned to sociality and collectiveness.

Co-working spaces, according to one participant, allow freelancers to concentrate on the creative aspects of their work (Interview with freelance designer conducted June 2014). Their co-workers comment on work, collaborate with one another, encourage the pursuit of creative impulse, and sit and discuss work openly and freely over lunch. This is seen by this participant as being a productivity-raising measure. It relates to a conception of productiveness that differs from the one that structures the experience of working to the rhythms of agency or company workplaces. Rather than 'freelance factories', then, where independent creatives assemble to self-discipline themselves into the productive rhythms of business, they point towards a different possibility. Agencies have 'big offices' where 'everyone is on the hour', and there is no other motivation than 'the money that they need'. Co-working spaces, for the latter participant, differ radically. The motivation—temporarily—becomes creative production rather than fidelity to the hours system. And, instead of a 'freelance factory' where individuality and sociality are stifled under the forces of hierarchy and organisation, freelancers in co-working spaces are both 'equal and independent', as one designer put it (Interview with freelance

designer conducted July 2014). Thus, the pursuit of creativity is attached to a wider political goal, of what, as we shall see, Bologna correctly identifies as self-determination and egalitarianism.

Conclusion

We should see this search for an alternative in light of the inability for creatives to truly escape the confines of the workplace in their transition to freelance work. The infrastructure of information and communication technologies (ICTs) both renders freelance creatives mobile and subjects them to new forms of measurement and control that mandate their subsumption within the regimes and routines of the workplace, even if at arm's length. This generates antagonisms around which freelancers can organise on the basis of a second aspect, also related to ICTs. This is that the dispersed connectivity and mobility of freelance work enabled by ICTs facilitates the formation of what Bologna calls new 'dynamics of sociality' (quoted in Boffo, 2014: 436). In this study, the formation of professional networks for finding and sharing work, and the migration of freelancers to shared 'co-working spaces' as an alternative to agency and client workplaces, are the key manifestations of these dynamics. Interestingly, each of these aspects challenges the simplistic characterisation of technology as the determining influence. As we shall see, the first is conditional on the composition of social relations in the workplace, and the contextual economic imperatives placed upon these relations by wider factors of profit, valorisation and accumulation. And, in the second, the role of technology is secondary to the formation of new social relations that stress the tangible and face-to-face, contrary to the radically communicative connectivity that techno-utopians like Mason (2015) ascribe to new revolutionary subjects such as the 'networked individual'.

The new forms of being together and belonging generated by freelancers in the case study cannot recapture the conditions on which workers' movements of the past mobilised, which operated around coalitions Bologna characterises as 'within the workplace, among people carrying out the same tasks' with 'the same working hours' and 'salaries' (Bologna, quoted in Boffo, 2014: 436). These movements organised publicly, with 'meetings tied to a physical place' (Boffo, 2014: 437).

Those circumstances are not immediately available to freelancers. And, Bologna suggests, they exhibit different motivations, towards individualism and entrepreneurship, that defy the desires and aspirations of workers in the past. While this can often result in a simplistic attachment to 'professionalism' as the locus of political mobilisation, Bologna, writing with Banfi, suggests that other models for activity are in emergence. Whereas traditional trade unionism mediates the individual through frameworks of representation, Bologna and Banfi argue that second-generation autonomous workers 'distrust delegation mechanisms and institutional negotiation structures' and hold out little hope for the attainment of collective benefits like welfare provision (Boffo, 2014: 437–438). Thus, they seek alternative ways to reconcile the individual in the collective. They place their trust instead in coalitions 'advancing demands directly related to one's professional activity', in a manner akin, Boffo suggests, to 'medieval guilds', and coalitions that shore up their 'social status' in the form of 'mutual help'. These coalitions seek, on the one hand, some sense of 'organisational belonging' around the guild mentality, and, on the other, a guard against 'the uncertainty of compensation' attendant on freelance work. Thus, the two factors Bologna and Banfi (quoted in Boffo, 2014: 438) class as 'sense of sociality and perception of risk' are central to the nascent forms of coalition-building among freelancers.

The Internet, Bologna and Banfi suggest (quoted in Boffo, 2014: 438), is an instrument of 'struggle in the social demand of a new space of encounter'. As my research suggests, professional networks for job sharing depend on the Internet and, as Bologna notes, act as 'shock-absorbers' to 'tame risk' associated with intermittent work. The Internet strengthens the 'weak ties' that bind the spatial and temporal existences of freelancers on an individual basis (Boffo, 2014: 439). But, the evidence I present here suggests, the coalitions established by freelancers do not reduce to ICTs, and in fact work in spite of this to generate other ways of being and acting together in order to recreate some of the foundations of past pre-Fordist modes of worker mobilisation oriented around craft and guild mentalities. The Internet does not afford the 'physicality' of past coalitions, and this must somehow be reconstructed by freelancers. As such,

'relations of proximity' are reinvented as 'an inescapable instrument of coalition' (Bologna and Banfi, quoted in Boffo, 2014: 439). Bologna and Banfi identify co-working spaces as central to this rediscovery of practical and physical proximity. But they do not simply reconstruct the forms of sociality associated with labour's past. Indeed, as Bologna and Banfi contend, the use of the Internet to bring freelancers together in coalitions of independent workers co-exists with, and gives rise to, 'a need of sociality entirely different' from that to which waged labour has traditionally been taken to relate.

Rather than the establishment of a collective worker capable of generating the utopian 'general intellect' Negri and his fellow travellers conceptually derive from Marx's Fragment on Machines (1973: 704–706, cf. Pitts, 2016b), what this opens out upon are a series of humbler aims associated with the realisation of a stifled creativity: 'physical contact, human relations, and less individualistic instruments and practices to confront the workings of the market' (Boffo, 2014: 439–440). What is at stake here is creativity itself, a quantity repressed and denied in the forms of economic objectivity to which it is subject in the course of its valorisation in labour. The immanent and liberatory creativity attributed to creative labour by accounts influenced by theories of immaterial labour suggests that it is something already realised, and elides the struggle that must be waged for it. Bologna's operaist account, therefore, offers a vital counterweight to postoperaist imaginings of the changing world of work that are gaining increasing currency in the delineation of radical policy responses to the future of capitalism.

Theorisations of the specificity of creative labour under the banner of immaterial labour are a mistaken attempt to get to grips with the dualness of creative activity under capitalism, as something that exists but only does so in the mode of being denied, and struggles to be realised in society where livelihoods are determined by their relationship with capital by means of the wage. If Bologna's 'second-generation autonomous workers' really do constitute the 'best candidates for' the creation of a 'society on new and more humane bases' (Bologna, quoted in Boffo, 2014: 433), exemplified in their 'egalitarianism' and drive for 'self-determination' in search of a greater capacity to pursue their creative

desire, this must be fought for. What the analysis presented here suggests is that this status is by no means given, as wishful thinkers would have us believe. Liberation is not inherent in the form of creative labour, freelance or otherwise. Rather, it must be struggled for, and the forms assumed by this struggle are, at present, a work in progress (see Bologna, 2013, and for examples from the UK, Conaty, Bird, & Ross, 2016).

Most of all, it tells us that the 'new normal' of work under capitalism is not inherent or immanent, but fought over and up for grabs. Changes in labour are not sufficient in and of themselves to suggest changes in capitalism as a whole, but exist in tension with factors and imperatives that take hold of working life from outside in the market and elsewhere. Creative labour, operating at the intersection of commodity production and exchange, is well-placed to address the antagonistic compulsions and relationships that constitute the contradictions of contemporary work. Freelance creatives, starting from scratch to craft a new infrastructure of twenty-first century struggle, possess the exciting capacity to leverage their pivotal position in the circulation of commodities to effect a real shift in the 'new normal' of working life. Blowing dust off old analytical and political tools may well be vital for doing so.

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Note

1. See Pitts (2016c) for an empirical case study.

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