Chapter 5

Work as Art and Art as Life

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This chapter considers two influential conceptions of contemporary labor, which emerge from and contribute to radically divergent interpretive traditions, but share surprising common ground. First is the largely celebratory idea of a “creative class” branded by Richard Florida, a management professor and globetrotting consultant to government and industry. Second is the account of “immaterial labor” assembled by a group of thinkers linked to the radical Leftist autonomia movement, including Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, Maurizio Lazzarato, and Paolo Virno. What do these various thinkers have to do with literature? I suggest that knowledge of literature’s material history—in particular, of the emergence and then mainstreaming of a romance with the figure of the writer as original creator—prompts a critique of the assumptions about subjectivity that their work tends to circulate, legitimate, and naturalize.

Florida and the autonomists broadly agree that over the past few decades more work has become comparable to artists’ work. For Florida this is positive. For the autonomists it is ambivalent, but they state with little equivocation that the kind of aesthetic expression subsumed within capitalist production is not real creativity, but rather its codified appearance in commodity form. Still, both camps imagine creativity as located within individuals’ uncontainable experimental energies and self-expressive capacities. In Florida’s work, these capacities are facilitated by development of one’s career within an expanding marketplace for creative work. For the autonomists, they are instead threatened by such incorporation. Indeed, they are quashed by the sheer process of individuation, since that too has by now been thoroughly subsumed into capitalist relations, until only a “monad” of pure “potential,” existing somehow before incorporation or even socialization, can be the source of real creativity.

Nevertheless, this potential, which is an inherent germ available for development, is for the autonomists also crucial to capitalism’s demise. In fact for both them and for Florida new currents in capitalist production may feed the universal germ of autonomous creativity. They part ways, though, when the autonomists state these currents trigger the rise of “the multitude,” which
may, will, or should mean the end of capitalism and the fruition of something resembling Marx’s “social individual”: the worker who does tasks that a thing cannot do, whose work is so satisfying it will be done for its own sake, motivated by no direct compulsion; in other words, again, the worker as romanticized “artist,” in this case imagined on the other side of capitalism’s demise. For Florida, this worker already exists; he is one himself.

Florida’s research accords with, and has in fact influenced, government policy, mainstream social science, and management literature in which individuals appear as born innovators, the origins of enterprise, naturally predisposed to be against what exists and to try to perfect it through invention, while capitalism discovers this preexisting tendency and then nurtures it into an engine for ceaseless renewal. The autonomists’ theories, of a resistant subjectivity that is at once subsumed within capitalism and the source of liberation from it, are not equivalent to Florida’s. Nevertheless, they are likewise more symptoms than diagnoses of the pervasive vocabulary that fathoms creative expression as an essence of experimentation emanating from an internal, natural source, and that finds one of its models in romantic apprehension of artists’ resistance to routine, to management, to standardization, and to commodification.

For Florida, the fact that this vocabulary is one that contemporary capitalism clearly requires and reinforces is not a problem: his imagined creative subject is the fruit of the progress of modernization, of the spread of self-reflexivity and freedom. The autonomists’ case is more difficult. They themselves tend to lament that the expressive self-realization at the core of their theory is the same one that is nurtured and expropriated by capital, yet they do not offer any alternative to this conception of human behavior. Their immaterial producer, her character assumed rather than interpreted, appears in a largely naturalized form, destitute of any significant history.

Before considering their differences, it is useful to place both camps in opposition to Daniel Bell’s late 1960s account of postindustrialism. “Postindustrial” was Bell’s label for an economy ruled by brains tasked with tracking and producing reams of paper rather than objects. Most simply, Bell claimed knowledge would replace labor and capital as the main factor in production; he heralded the arrival of an era of prosperity for all, and with it the demise of the embattled worker. But he also lamented the persistence of some cultural contradictions, a “disjunction of realms” that seemed to be slowing the coming future’s arrival. While noting scientific and technical rationalization of the production process, he claimed it was in tension with a widespread embrace of “norms of self-realization” and self-fulfillment, as more and more people wished to unearth and respect not their inner technocrat but their “whole person.” Captivated by the 1960s counterculture, which constellated narcissistic adversarial artist-types who were celebrants of the “free creative spirit” at war with repression, people everywhere wished to shirk the roles they were asked to perform at work, so as to uncover the authentic self, necessarily unique and irreducible, “free of the contrivances and conventions, the masks and hypocrisies” (19). As a result, the “principles