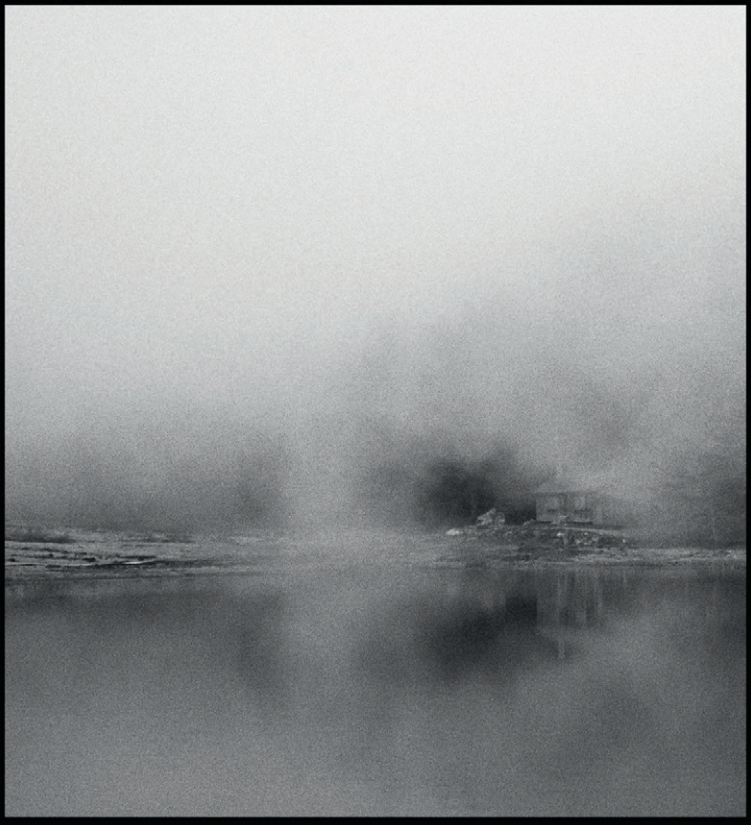
Fantasy, Neoliberalism and Precariousness

Coping Strategies in the Cultural Industries



Jérémy Vachet

DIGITAL ACTIVISM AND SOCIETY

FANTASY, NEOLIBERALISM AND PRECARIOUSNESS

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Coping Strategies in the Cultural Industries

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JÉRÉMY VACHET

Audencia, France

United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India
Malaysia – China

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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To my surrogate family at Coume Escure, to my loves – past and present – and to my friends. You have helped me to cope with life.

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1

INTRODUCTION

This study aims to contribute to debates within cultural theory, sociology, the political economy of communication and cultural studies about working lives in the cultural and creative industries. Drawing on an extensive body of literature on the cultural and media industries, this study looks at musicians aged 25–37 and based in Paris, Brooklyn, San Francisco, Portland and Stockholm. The study finds that neoliberalism – by increasing precariousness encompassing all aspects of life, such as work, housing and relationships with others – affects cultural workers' experience of life. Rather than being transformed into subjects who willingly embrace neoliberal incentives but nevertheless feel compelled to take responsibility for themselves, participants develop (albeit differently depending on their gender, ethnic and social class background) a complex set of coping strategies and defence mechanisms, which ultimately prevents them from flourishing.

In the past decades, many public policies have developed a glamourised description of work, e.g., in the UK creative industries discourses (Banks & Hesmondhalgh, 2009; Banks & O'Connor, 2009; Hesmondhalgh & Pratt, 2005). Expanding to other countries, these kind of neoliberal policies advocated the development of the creative industries and the creative economy, considering cultural work as a model that could expand to other sectors of the economy, participating in a process of 'economisation of culture' and 'culturisation of the economy' (Bouquillion & Le Corf, 2010; O'Connor, 2015). For some authors, these discourses provide a justification for new forms of labour exploitation outside the cultural and creative industries by praising the artistic mode of production – project-based, highly skilled, innovative,

flexible and prone to self-exploitation – as an ideal form of work (Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999; Lash & Urry, 2000; Menger, 2003; Ross, 2000, p. 2).

As recent critiques have pointed out, these neoliberal discourses on creative work and entrepreneurialism promote a new politics of work which advocate flexibility and the development of so-called human capital (Banks & Hesmondhalgh, 2009; Banks & O'Connor, 2009; Cunningham, 2002; Galloway & Dunlop, 2007; Oakley, 2009b). In recent years, these discourses have spread beyond the creative industries (and economy) towards, for instance, the platform and collaborative economy. These industries have common features – scattered work, blurred frontiers between work and fun and professional and non-professional (Codagnone, Abadie, & Biagi, 2016, p. 5; Fuchs, 2017). However, while workers see a chance for self-exploration, potential flourishing and autonomous work, neoliberal public policies seek to create a turn to 'entrepreneurship', where individuals are reliant, flexible and able to take care of themselves (Ouellette, 1995; Taylor, 2015).

Nevertheless, a rich body of literature on cultural labour has critiqued discourses praising cultural labour as an ideal type by outlining how work in the cultural industries is insecure, often temporary and short-term, precarious and not so autonomous. In a spirit of self-exploitation in the name of self-exploration and to keep up with a competitive labour market, work is often subject to intensive and anti-social working patterns in informal contexts where working and personal identities become blurred (Banks, 2007; Gill, 2010; McRobbie, 2002; Stahl, 2012; Ursell, 2000).

Although in recent years, the features of working life in this sector have been well-documented (Banks, 2017; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011; Oakley, 2009a), little research seems to have looked at the psychosocial impact on the working lives of individuals. Exceptions within the field of cultural studies and feminists' studies are discussed below (e.g., Allen, 2016; Allen, Quinn, Hollingworth, & Rose, 2013; McRobbie, 2007a; Scharff, 2016; Taylor, 2011; Taylor & Littleton, 2008, 2012). However, the lack of interest in the psychosocial is, however, not unique to the study of cultural labour (Chancer & Andrews, 2014; Wilkinson, 2001, p. 16).

Taking into account existing scholarship, the problem this book explores is: what is the psychosocial impact of precariousness and other problematic features of work in the cultural industries under neoliberalism and in a context of individualisation? I seek to explore participants' response to structural pressures by asking the following research questions:

- What is the psychosocial impact of precariousness on participants working in the independent music industries?

- What are the coping strategies used to bear the struggle between an organised self-realisation (with fantasies about the good life) and the uncertainty of daily life under neoliberalism?

The key finding of this book is that precariousness deeply affects people by making their future highly uncertain and their present a constant emergency. The health hazards resulting from precariousness in the cultural industries are related to the process of self-construction where self-exploration and self-exploitation often meet (Hesmondhalgh, 2010; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011). Although often invisible, inner wounds should not be underestimated: hidden injuries resulting from cultural work include many different kinds of mental and emotional disorders such as unbearable anxiety, exhaustion and burn-out, which ultimately lead to physical troubles and even sometimes early death (Musgrave, 2017). Consequently, I will argue that people develop coping strategies and defence mechanisms that allow them to adjust to self-imposed conditions of increasing pressures to follow a manufactured self-realisation under precariousness. These can be seen as 'shields' (Potamianou, 1997) or 'skills for adjusting to newly proliferating pressures' (Berlant, 2011, p. 8). For Berlant, these strategies are 'impasses' or delays enabling them 'to develop gestures of composure, of mannerly transaction, of being-with in the world as well as of rejection, refusal, detachment, psychosis, and all kinds of radical negation' (Berlant, 2011, p. 199).

Methodologically, this study considered the working lives of musicians in the independent music sector as a case study for working lives under neoliberalism. Data were collected from participant observation and semi-structured qualitative interviews with 32 participants (22 men and 10 women) aged 25 to 37. Following the snowball sampling method, the data collection did not seek to claim for representativeness but mirrored unequal gender, racial and ethnic representations in the CCIs. Ultimately, this mode of data collection limited the assessment of social variables such as race and ethnicity – only two participants were non-white, which reflects general patterns of underrepresentation of non-white people in the cultural and creative industries (Banks, 2017, p. 152; UK Music, 2017; Yoshihara, 2007). The fieldwork was conducted in the United States (Brooklyn, San Francisco, Oakland and Portland), Sweden (Stockholm) and France (Paris), between October 2015 and April 2016.

As a musician myself, the research is also informed by first-hand experience of the field of independent music: participant observation, informal or

un-structured interviews and ethnographies, led between 2008 and 2014 among musicians in the United States, Sweden, France and Iceland in concert venues, recording studios and accommodations.

Theoretically, this study draws on a wide body of literature: cultural theory, sociology, psychology, political economy of the media and moral economy and cultural studies in order to grasp the diverse forces at stake when looking at the psychosocial impact of precariousness under neoliberalism. Indeed, as Sayer (1999, pp. 3–4) argues, the use of a transdisciplinary approach can be particularly fruitful when accounting for the role played by culture on individuals' sense of being.

Moreover, this book aims to tackle the sociological fear of psychologisation, a fear which places limits on sociological explanation (Sayer, 1999, p. 5). Inspired by the field of the psychosocial, this study answers this fear by developing a sociological examination of concepts generally used in psychological theories, such as anxiety, narcissism, self-esteem and moral philosophy, such as recognition. The use of a sociological lens to look at psychological subjects of inquiry can complement the understanding of the relationships between mental health and structural pressures (see also Bourdieu, 1999).

However, a dialogue between different fields, such as psychoanalysis and sociology, risks being made at the expense of the rigour and epistemology of each field (Bourdieu, 1999, pp. 512–513). This is generally observed in pop-sociology and literature on self-development which too often manipulate concepts emptied of their substance. Section 1.6 introduces the field of the psychosocial that informed this book.

1.1 NEOLIBERALISM

There has been a wide range of scholarship on neoliberalism, often focused on framing the contours of the concept and its multiple political origins over the twentieth century (Burgin, 2015; Mirowski & Plehwe, 2009; Peck, 2010). One of the origins of the term 'neoliberalism' is attributed to the *Colloque Walter Lippmann* held in Paris in 1938, at which liberal theorists – including Hayek – stood against the idea of a *laissez-faire* economic liberalism. Conversely, neoliberal ideas advocate for state intervention and 'the priority of the price mechanism, free enterprise, the system of competition and a strong and impartial state' (Mirowski & Plehwe, 2009, pp. 13–14). But for decades, and

more specifically after the Second World War, when Keynesian public policy was more in fashion (at least in liberal democracies), the term and the economic philosophy of neoliberalism of the *Mont Pelerin Society* economists such as Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman remained relatively marginal. Its reappearance in the 1970s is associated with Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan's policies and Augusto Pinochet's economic reforms – inspired by the 'Chicago Boys', Friedman's former students – following the military coup in Chile in 1973. This understanding of neoliberalism refers to the Chicago School of economics, rejecting Keynesian Economics and welfare state policy.

Although multiple in the forms it takes, neoliberalism equates with sets of ideas and ideologies accompanied by discourses associated with a radically free market where competition is exacerbated and the market deregulated (Gilbert, 2013, p. 8). It effects are multiple and include a wide range of monetary and social policies deregulating labour markets, contracting democratic institutions (Gilbert, 2013, p. 12), in favour of businesses, and 'indifferent toward poverty, social deracination, cultural decimation, long-term resource depletion, and environmental destruction' (Brown, 2003, pp. 37–38).

The understanding of neoliberalism depends on the socio-economic and geographical context in which it emerges. As Ong (2006) remarked, although neoliberalism is a doctrine with a coherent ideology, it is also malleable, capable of adaptation depending on cultural, geographical, economic and social specificities to implement its core values.

Neoliberalism distances itself from 'classical liberalism' by advocating that state institutions play a crucial role in shaping individuals (Gilbert, 2013, pp. 8–9). According to its critics, under neoliberalism, social institutions tend to compel people and things to change according to its doctrine, which differs from the *laissez-faire* in classical liberalism. Therefore, neoliberalism should not be understood as the decline of welfare capitalism but by its development through an array of political, social and economic regulations since it expands and extends regulations (Levi-Faur & Jordana, 2005, p. 7). For some, such as Rose (1989, 1999), neoliberalism does not necessarily represent a fracture with 'classical liberalism' but rather an intensification of it, hence his use of the term 'advanced liberalism' rather than neoliberalism.

Although authors often use different terms to describe the socio-economic era in which we live – neoliberalism (Foucault, 2008), capitalism in late modernity (Giddens, 1990, 1991), the new spirit of capitalism (Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999), new capitalism (Sennett, 1998), advanced liberalism (Rose, 1989, 1996) – the majority of the works presented throughout this book aim at analysing and criticising a similar socio-economic era. Moreover, although

their political and theoretical positions are different, they tend to share three common points. We can understand these adapting a categorisation developed by Lemke (2012) to analyse neoliberalism. First, this period is treated by such authors a creating manipulative and inaccurate ways of understanding the world (Lemke, 2012, p. 80), which need to be replaced by a scientific emancipatory knowledge. Second, the period is conceived as on in which the world saw the 'extension of economics into the domain of politics, the triumph of capitalism over the state, and a globalization that escapes the political regulations of the nation-state' (Lemke, 2012, p. 80). Third, neoliberalism is understood as having destructive effects on individuals and on society by promoting a process of 'individualisation endangering collective bonds, and the imperative of flexibility, mobility and risk-taking that threaten family values and emotional bonds' (Lemke, 2012, p. 80). It is this latter issue that is the main focus of this book. The following section deals with neoliberal's political goal to change the soul of subjects and the section after that presents its effects on subjects through the process of individualisation. The sections named above serve as theoretical basis aiming at understanding neoliberalism and its psycho-social impact on selves.

1.1.1 'To Change the Soul': The Political Goal of Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism should not be reduced to economic policies that have no political and social implications. Neoliberal rationality, while being grounded in the market, extends its values to all institutions and social actions (Brown, 2003, p. 39). Neoliberalism is a programme aimed at shaping, through discourses and power, areas of social life formerly excluded from it, for instance, universities, hospitals and subjectivity (Harvey, 2007, p. 2). Neoliberalism should not be considered a process of dismantling of the state *stricto sensus* but rather, among other aspects, as an intensification of the process of governing the individual – which almost paradoxically consists of freeing subjects from existing ties and transforming individuals into autonomous, entrepreneurial and self-caring agents, creating new forms of subjectivity (Brown, 2003; Gilbert, 2013; Rose, 1989). Under neoliberalism, the subject becomes an ideal object of political transformation (Gilbert, 2013, p. 10) and governmental intervention promotes entrepreneurial, competitive and commercial behaviour (Davies, 2015). Such an approach towards the subject is very different from classical liberalism, which assumes that individuals, as naturally driven by such values, will be better off untouched by government intervention (Gilbert, 2013, p. 9). But neoliberalism's project to change the self should

come as no surprise, since as Margaret Thatcher (1981) once famously said: 'economics are the method: the object is to change the soul'. In other words, neoliberalism is 'a mode of governance encompassing but not limited to the state, and one that produces subjects, forms of citizenship and behaviour, and a new organization of the social' (Brown, 2003, p. 37).

Under neoliberalism, individuals are conceived as entrepreneurial actors – rational, calculating beings whose value is determined according to their capacity to take care of themselves. The neoliberal conception of the self is individualistic; self-interest is conceived as the only motivation for action, and competition is exacerbated (for praise of such neoliberal definitions of the self, see Becker, 1992). Positioning 'human and institutional action as rational entrepreneurial action' (Brown, 2003, p. 40) aims at imposing economic rationality on every sphere of existence and transforming human beings into *homo economicus*. By introducing rationality and 'self-care' as moral responsibilities, behaviours are driven by the rational calculation of costs and benefits. In return, the self bears the responsibility of her own actions, even when they are seriously constrained by external pressures such as social inequalities, high unemployment rates and lack of access to welfare benefits.

Such an understanding of the political goals of neoliberalism, going beyond economic factors, addressing how neoliberalism aims at transforming moral subjects into autonomous and entrepreneurial agents, provides the theoretical basis for this book. The theoretical framework developed in Sections 1.1 and 1.2 provide a basis for understanding the influence of an economic system not only on society but ultimately on the psyches of individuals.

1.2 PRECARIOUSNESS, NEOLIBERALISM AND THE LACK OF POLITICAL MOBILISATION

1.2.1 What Does Precariousness Mean?

Discussions of neoliberalism often encompass the concept of precariousness. Broadly speaking, being 'precarious' refers to working conditions under post-Fordism characterised by insecurity and flexibility (Brophy & de Peuter, 2007, p. 180; Butler, 2004). By extension, Brophy and de Peuter consider that:

> *Being precarious means that one's relationship to time is marked by uncertainty, from the part-time on-call retail clerk whose non-work time is haunted by the prospect of being called in to do a shift, to the*

> *self-employed copywriter perpetually juggling contracts, rarely declining a contract for fear of a future lull in the flow of income.*
> *(Brophy & de Peuter, 2007, p. 182)*

'Being precarious' is related to the term 'precarity', an English neologism formulated after the French term 'precarité', a concept with both theoretical and political connotations (Brophy & de Peuter, 2007; Butler, 2004; Papadopoulos, Stephenson, & Tsianos, 2008; de Peuter, 2014; Neilson & Rossiter, 2005, p. 52). For many authors, precarity draws on precariousness and immaterial labour, two concepts developed by, amongst others, autonomist Marxists – or post-operaists – such as Michael Hardt, Maurizio Lazzarato, Antonio Negri and Paolo Virno (Hardt & Negri, 2000, 2004; Lazzarato, 1996). Immaterial labour is defined as 'the labour that produces the information and cultural content of the commodity' (Lazzarato, 1996, p. 133).

The concept of precarity also draws on feminist accounts of exploitation (Federici, 2008; Hochschild, 2012, 2013; Hochschild & Machung, 2012; McRobbie, 2010). The overall objective of the concept of precarity is to counter celebration of post-Fordist forms of work, which lack the *relative* security of work in the 'Fordist' era (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011, p. 161).

However, the English definition of the term 'precarity' inherits the lack of clear definition from its French origin. As Barbier (2005, p. 358) writes, the meaning of the term *precarité* in French sociology and among activists is already too broad to translate directly to other countries with different socio-economic contexts. Moreover, as a synonym for insecurity and exploitation, the term precarity does not seem to bring any specific value as a conceptual tool, though it may encourage activism (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2008, p. 100).

In line with other works on the subject, the meaning of the term 'precariousness' developed in this book is not limited to labour conditions under post-Fordist economies but extends to all aspects of life (Armano & Murgia, 2015; Butler, 2004). Indeed, precariousness describes a much larger uncertain relation to the world than the term precarity, which is often solely tied to work, describing flexible, part-time and uncertain forms of unemployment. The term precariousness has an ontological nature, and beyond work, precariousness invades all aspects of life.

Consequently, this understanding of the term precariousness is close to Bourdieu's understanding of *précarité*, defined as a condition affecting individuals' experience of life, regardless of social background (Bourdieu, 1999). For Bourdieu, '*précarité* is everywhere' (*la précartié est partout*), it 'haunts the conscious and the unconscious' and it can be an indicator of the