

When carrot becomes a stick

“The way artistic labour is organised makes artists arguably a prototype not just for work organisation, but for innovation in the rest of the economy.”

NESTA 2008

The Carrot Workers Collective

The carrot is a symbol around which the group organises its investigations. The carrot represents the promise of paid work, meaningful experience, success and stability which in the cultural sector, more often than not, is never actually realised. More generally ‘the carrot’ signifies the hope that we might organise our work around ‘creativity’ rather than drudgery; an aspiration that is used to prompt, cajole and sometimes blackmail workers into long-term and recurring periods of free and precarious labour. The carrot becomes a disciplinary device that taps into our desires and aspirations in order to string us along. The ‘creative industries’ until recently considered the driving force behind the UK’s economy are now being laid to waste. We are witnessing a time in which not only the cultural sector, but all aspects of public and social life, are being dismantled by the state, narrated to us as a necessary and ‘tough but fair’ response to the so-called ‘credit crisis’, and working to construct an artificial context and set of social relations with which we are expected to comply.

The intern

The intern has been a central figure for investigation within the Carrot Workers Collective. Interns and volunteers are fast becoming a structural necessity, de facto masking the collapse of the cultural sector, hiding the exodus of public resources from these activities and thus preventing the general public from perceiving the unsustainability of the situation. In this landscape, interns offer both a solution and a threat. They fill the ever-widening gaps between ambitions and cash, but they also legitimise the exploitative nature of cultural work – reminding those who are employed in the sector that there is always someone ready to do your job for free (if they can afford to). The intern, whilst representing a very specific condition, often perceived as transitional, has come to expose the broader economic tendency of free labour conditions and precarity beyond the cultural sector, in which the carrot and stick continue to increasingly regulate our present: from student loans, ‘personal development’ pathways, to the things we all tell ourselves to get through the day; we herd and are herded along a path of sacrifice through to the promise of self-fulfilment. The ‘self-actualising’ and infinitely flexible (and exploitable) ‘creative’ becomes the ideal towards which all work should strive, setting a corrosive example and encouraging a series of expectation around non-waged labour that infiltrate the entirety of productive and social relations.

Workfare

While this ‘credit crisis’ has exposed the bankruptcy of the system that produced such huge inequalities in gender, class division and social mobility over the last 30 years, the solution proposed is of course, more of the same, and worse. In the UK context where we are based, this ‘solution’ has been called the ‘Big Society’, an expression that was used as the flagship policy idea of the 2010 Conservative Party general election manifesto. The ‘Big Society’ places a strong emphasis upon personal responsibility and initiative, the rhetoric it mobilises is the one against the ‘culture of entitlement’ in which citizens of the welfare state supposedly indulge. It is a (mis)appropriation of notions such as self-organisation, cooperative working/living and alternative economies: the Big Society apparently honours these principles, but incorporates them as tools of governance within a socio-economic structure that remains fundamentally hierarchical and unequal. Self-responsibility becomes a cover word for being left atomised and on our own. The slippery idea of ‘workfare’ is symptomatic of an even stronger emphasis on the necessity of labour as indicative not only of

personal *wealth*, but also and foremost of personal *worth*. While the state appears to hand back its power to the public, which would be a welcome move, state funding is being violently withdrawn. The oxymoronic expression 'compulsory volunteering' is becoming the real experience of students turned interns in order to access a profession; unemployed (now jobseekers) persons obliged to do civil service in order to stay on benefits; and migrants forced to accept fake contracts in order to keep their visas.

Free labour and higher education

More and more globalised, *bolognese* universities are providing their students or 'clients' relationships with the industries as potential employers via job placements. A growing number of masters promise as an added bonus to their programme, to make privileged arrangements for their students to intern in so and so company. This is a particularly vicious situation, as the pedagogically valid enthusiasm for experience-learning has been genetically mutated into a trade off in which the student is both an intelligence being sold and the one who pays. As the organisation of labour changed in postfordism, so did the work cycle and its impact on the individual life. The old idea of vertical progression, that is, of making a career within the same company, while gradually acquiring more responsibilities and more remuneration, does no longer apply in almost all sectors of production, and especially in those who are highly dependent upon technical innovation, cognitive capital or social trends. Students at a master level possess the most valuable profile: working knowledge of the most recent technical tools, the freshest sensitivity to emerging aesthetic tendencies, a very flexible and adaptable attitude to organisational changes. Universities that are incorporating exclusive internships into their programmes are in the position of pimps (positing as helpful mediators), as they acquire value both from the students (who pay fees) and from the partner companies (who land branding value to their name, if not also donations in hard cash or equipment).

As noted by Sergio Bologna, the job market is not keeping up with the increasing specialisation and qualifications of workers. In fact, most jobs descriptions are designed so as to require the lowest possible degree of competence, and yet people see further education and endless specialisation programmes as an investment for future revenues. And now that the prospect of finding work after a university degree is being greatly overshadowed by the reality that jobs are disappearing (and resurfacing as free labour placements), it is becoming more and more urgent to demand further attention to the ways in which university and education operates and in helping us understand the class composition we are part of and witnessing.

On the cuts to the art and humanities

One of the aspects of the education reforms (read cuts) that has most impacted public opinion in the UK is the announced total defunding of humanities and art courses (as we write we are still waiting to hear if the proposal will be voted on the 9th December 2010). This comes as a shock in a country that until yesterday led the conversion towards the 'creative industries' paradigm and claimed for itself the title of 'Cool Britannia'.

Today, the British 'creative class' (if such a thing ever existed) is piping hot with rage. Paralleling the announced cuts to its educational sector (an important source of relatively stable income for many project workers in the field), the Tory government has also implemented a substantial cut to the art sector.

Art courses flourished in a time when the creative industries also grew. In the case of the creative industries, it is important to remember, as Andrew Ross reminded us, that the very structure of these industries (that is, the very predicament that magically transforms cultural activities into profit-making machines) is based on the ability to generate profit from the exploitation of intellectual property. This

means that structurally this economic sector benefits from the exploitation and appropriation of value produced by underemployed or free working practitioners. This is a different relation to the surplus workforce than the one described by Marx as the reserve of desperate unemployed that are used to threaten other workers. In order to produce a star, an iconic product or a recognisable brand, a rich cultural milieu needs to be sustained, and this milieu needs to remain unpaid. Only a few players will be allowed to enter a space of profitability, and this is how wealth creation becomes possible.

In this respect, Save the Arts, a campaign fronted by various famous faces of the art world and lobbying for the defence of arts through the commissioning (in this case, privately funded) of works in response to the cuts, is disgraceful precisely because it is not bold enough to shift the terms of the arguments. In vehemently defending the value of the arts, it sidesteps any responsibility for transforming what was already a highly problematic system of precarity and exploitation. Hence, the arts were not sponsored for the intrinsic value they can bring to people's intellectual and emotional life, nor for the kind of social relations they contribute to, and the same is true for the field of education.

It is therefore, now more than ever, vital to confront the fabrications of social worth and value to which we are asked to submit our time, energy and knowledge, and together, construct our own social contexts within and beyond which we can build meaningful thoughts and actions.