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Freedom or precarity? Reflections on cultural work in the platform economy

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Will digital platforms democratize cultural production and enable new forms of micro-entrepreneurship beyond the gatekeepers of creative industries, or will they exacerbate the insecurity, fragmentation, and competition of already precarious creative careers? This question has been central to debates on the digitalization of cultural production ever since the emergence of the platform economy. Today, social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube offer cultural workers new opportunities to both produce, distribute, and monetize cultural content, while portfolio platforms like Bēhance and Dribbble allow the curation and marketing of creative portfolios and skills. Meanwhile, labor platforms like Upwork and Fiverr promise to intermediate creative services by algorithmically connecting cultural workers with clients, while taking a fee from their transactions. Platforms can create new opportunities, but scholars have also increasingly highlighted how digital platforms generate new forms of algorithmic inequality and highly precarious careers of aspirational self-employment (Duffy, 2017; Poell et al., 2022; Jarrett, 2022).

In my dissertation, *At least I have this freedom* (Karlsson, 2024), I examine the implications and meanings of platform-based entrepreneurship for the working practices and identities of cultural workers in Sweden. The thesis explores the intersections of precarity and entrepreneurship among cultural platform workers and freelancers, analyzing the often-ambivalent tensions that emerge in contemporary digital working arrangements. To facilitate a broader conversation about the role and impact of platforms at the intersections of art, culture, and entrepreneurship (ACE), this essay discusses some of main findings of the thesis and their implications for future research and practice.

Cultural work in an age of platforms

In my thesis, I draw on data collected through interviews and digital ethnography to foreground the narratives of platform workers active in fields such as graphic design, illustration, photography, film, and content creation. The backdrop of the thesis is the ongoing transformation of creative industries, driven by processes such as platformization, entrepreneurialization, and precarization (Poell et al., 2022). These interconnected processes are today often associated with the emergence of the gig economy – an economy characterized by short, task-based work, intermediated through digital platforms that profit on and control labor transactions through algorithmic management and surveillance.

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Cultural and artistic workers have long been familiar with the temporary, project-oriented, and task-based work that characterizes the gig economy. In Sweden, the cultural and creative industries are also among the sectors where most workers use digital platforms to find work (Palm, 2019). Despite this, public and academic debates around gig work and the platform economy have predominantly focused on low-skill work within service industries, such as food delivery through Foodora or transport services through Uber. The digital gigification of cultural work, however, has less often been studied (see Alacovska et al., 2024), despite cultural workers arguably serving the model for the gig-based working arrangements now transposed to broader segments of the workforce through digital labor platforms.

In the thesis, I seek to understand how the subjectivities of cultural freelancers are formed – that is, how their self-understandings are shaped both by their work and their interactions with digital platforms. I explore how this occurs at the intersection of the gig economy's imposition of entrepreneurial, uncertain, and piece-based working models, and creative freelancers' own desires for meaningful, autonomous, and creative work. Drawing on both Foucauldian and Marxian theoretical perspectives on labor, subjectivity and precarity, I view these dimensions as inherently intertwined. A key starting point is the notion that capitalism, like any economic system, must produce not only objects but also subjects who perceive their position within the system as relatively natural, stable and self-evident (Mezzadra, 2018; Read, 2022). This perspective suggests that subjectivity is both a product of and a driving force for sustaining particular labor relations. The enterprising, creative platform workers that the gig economy relies on do not exist naturally. Rather, as I argue in the thesis, they are produced through processes of socialization that channel the desire of individuals towards certain productive ends.

One notable feature of digital platforms is precisely their imposition of flexible platform entrepreneurship as a desirable subjective norm. Gig platforms ranging from Foodora (food delivery) to Uber (transport) to Upwork (creative and technical freelance work) promote their platforms as enabling flexible careers where workers can 'be their own bosses' and decide when and where to work. Being a digital entrepreneur is marketed as a fundamental freedom. Meanwhile, platforms for social media, e-commerce and crowdfunding all promise new ways to monetize cultural content, allowing individuals to 'make a living doing what they love' (Duffy, 2017; see also Rouzé, 2019). However, these discourses of freedom and passion sharply contrast with the highly competitive winner-takes-all character of digital cultural markets, where success depends on opaque algorithmic modes of visibility and network effects that benefit those with already substantial followings (Srnicek, 2017).

Rather than viewing digital entrepreneurship and the often highly precarious conditions of platform work as contradictory, I approach them as two sides of the same coin. To explore their relationship, I particularly draw on and develop Isabell Lorey's (2015) notion of *self-precarization*. Lorey describes self-precarization as a form of governmentality, by which self-employed cultural workers internalize insecurity and contingency as voluntary choices. Whether secure employment is seen as unattainable or as something monotonous and undesirable, the creative-but-precarious career path is, according to Lorey, often perceived as a free and autonomous choice, serving as a major point of identification. Through a Foucauldian lens of power (e.g. Foucault, 1982), self-precarization is not only a disruptive process, but also a productive one: self-precarization generates desire, meaning, modes of identification, and new lines of normality.

In my thesis, I deepen and nuance the understanding of self-precarization as a sociological process by grounding it in the lived experiences and narratives of creative freelancers in Sweden. As the title of the dissertation implies, freedom is a central theme in the stories of the freelancers I interviewed, albeit in complex and ambiguous ways. The title is a quote from an illustrator who explained how he endured work-related anxiety, insomnia, and fear of future poverty by telling

himself that *at least* he enjoyed the freedom of being self-employed. Interestingly, the freedom he referred to was not primarily the artistic freedom traditionally valued by artists (Banks, 2010); instead, it was the entrepreneurial freedom to decide when to work, not having a boss, and being able to pick which clients to work for. Despite meager income, experiences of burnout, and long spells without paid commissions, his identification as a 'free individual' in control of his own life was essential to his decision to remain a freelancer for over a decade.

My participants' identification with insecure self-employment is particularly interesting in the context of the Swedish welfare state; a context where Norbäck (2021, p. 3) recently argued that "*entrepreneurial subjectivity would arguably have less fertile soil in which to grow*" due to its collectivist history and the Swedish model. Yet, my findings reveal how entrepreneurial notions of freedom have embedded themselves into a new common sense among many cultural workers in Sweden. Developing an entrepreneurial mindset, seizing opportunities as they appear, and embracing the uncertainties of solo self-employment were described by several freelancers as some of the most appealing aspects of their work. For some, the unpredictable of their workflow, and even their uncertain (and often low) incomes, were framed as exciting and motivating factors – an antidote to the monotony they imagined in full-time employment.

Others, however, were far less enthusiastic about the necessity of being entrepreneurial, describing their self-employment as a form of 'forced entrepreneurship' (Oakley, 2014). Yet, even among these workers, the normative framing of flexible self-employment as desirable was evident. One photographer repeatedly told me that her dream of a secure, full-time position felt "*depressing*", "*abnormal*", and "*weird*", revealing how she shaped her self-conception against an ideal of solo self-employment as what creative workers *ought* to desire. Nearly all interviewees acknowledged that digital freelancing was the only viable way to sustain themselves as cultural workers, highlighting the structural realities of cultural labor markets having a large oversupply of aspiring workers vis-à-vis the number of employed positions.

The necessity of adopting an entrepreneurial attitude was also evident in how participants narrated their experiences of navigating the platform economy. Historically, artistic workers have often relied on day jobs to support themselves (cf. Roberts, 2024), and multiple job holding has been identified as a common feature of platform work (Ilsøe et al., 2021). The platform economy creates new opportunities to make income across various platforms, but as a result, also leads to further fragmentation of labor experiences. In the thesis, I introduce the concept of patchworking to analyze how participants piece together figurative patchworks of income from multiple sources and platforms to manage platform-based precarity. This concept illuminates the entrepreneurial multi-tasking and risk-taking that freelancers engage in when navigating what one interviewee referred to as a "*jungle*" of platforms — each offering uncertain promises of success to aspiring creators.

A central entrepreneurial dimension of my participants' patchwork careers and their engagement with platforms is the blurring of boundaries – not only between work and free time but also of paid and unpaid labor. Using various platforms to find gigs, create and upload artworks to the personal portfolio(s), adapt content to specific algorithmic modes of visibility, and research user cultures and platform affordances demands significant time and effort. Many participants described working evenings and weekends with on uncompensated tasks such as researching new platforms, creating content for their digital portfolios, or devising new business strategies. Unpaid labor was also common in terms of doing tasks for clients for little or no compensation to sustain business relationships, build experience, or getting positive ratings on gig platforms like Upwork. The platform economy's business models rely heavily on this 'free labor' (cf. Terranova, 2004) of users. Yet, analyzing the meanings that creative workers attach to unpaid platform work reveals

that they rarely perceive it as exploitative. Instead, they often legitimize it as an "*investment*" in their future: a form of hope labor (Mackenzie & McKinlay, 2020), where working for free is naturalized as a chance to make a name for oneself, gaining contacts, or cultivating a digital presence that might – but does not necessarily – translate into paid opportunities in the future.

Looking ahead

Contributing to ACE's agenda of understanding the conditions of cultural entrepreneurship and practice today, I propose that we view the position of creative freelancers reliant on digital platforms as fundamentally ambivalent. It is important to avoid both victimizing discourses and celebratory narratives when discussing their working conditions. By centering freelancers' own accounts of how they identify with their work and grapple with the tensions involved, we can bring out the nuances and tensions of how they negotiate insecurity and uncertainty as a new normal. For future research, I argue it is important to resist dualistic understandings of cultural entrepreneurship, and to instead focus on its "*hybridity*" (cf. Murgia & Pulignano, 2021). Creative digital freelancers in Sweden embody this hybridity. They are entrepreneurial *and* precarious; they actively engage in work they find meaningful and fulfilling, while also being subject to high emotional pressure, low and inconsistent income, and frequent experiences of work-related anxiety, burnout and sleeplessness. Their desire for work that is creative, free, flexible and fulfilling must be taken seriously. Yet, these same desires for independence and freedom are currently also exploited by platform companies and clients for cheap resources of labor. This has implications both for policy and future research.

Uncertainty and risk-taking have always been intrinsic to cultural and creative labor, often serving as a precondition for originality and innovation (Menger, 2014). However, if cultural workers are increasingly expected to embrace market-based entrepreneurship through digital platforms, institutional systems of support are essential for counterbalancing the current trend of responsibilizing individuals for their economic success and well-being. When asked about the most challenging aspect of their work, my respondents unanimously identified the insecurity and the (relative) lack of social safety nets, particularly during periods when things do not go as planned. In Sweden, systems for social security and unemployment benefits remain largely structured around standard full-time employment as the norm, leaving platform-dependent workers in precarious positions. It will be an important political issue in the coming years how society can better protect these workers from the contingencies of their social and economic position.

For the ACE community interested in the intersections of art, culture, and entrepreneurship, the thesis invites further inquiry into how we can envision more sustainable and equal artistic practices and organizational models within the platform economy. This is not only a challenge for researchers, but also for artistic and cultural practitioners who experiment with new ways of organizing their work through platforms. Interdisciplinary dialogue that extends beyond academia will be essential for fostering new imaginaries of cultural and artistic work in the digital era.

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