



# Passionate Work?

Labor Conditions in Italian Fashion.

by

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Ever since the late 1990's and the publication of the original UK Department of Culture, Media and Sport 'Creative industries mapping document', 'creativity' and 'creative industries' have had a growing presence in policy discourses in most western, and some Asian countries. This has generated a steady stream of policy-oriented research, funded by government bodies at various levels- from local boroughs up to the UN (cf. Pratt & Jeffcutt, 2009). Most of this research has focused on ways to map or measure the creative industries; estimate their contribution to employment and economic growth, or finding ways of facilitating innovation in creative 'clusters'. Until recently however, analyses of the actual conditions and make-up of creative labor have been largely absent. Instead, most of the policy-oriented discourse on creativity has adopted largely ideological definitions of creative labor as intrinsically self-actualizing and meritocratic; and of workers as a 'creative class' marked by (relative) affluence, diversity and the pursuit of an experience oriented, elite-consumerist lifestyle. The most influential exponent of this perspective has been Richard Florida, whose many writings on the 'creative class' present this category as an agglomeration of 'exceptionally talented individuals' whose function it is to 'produce new ideas' and who are mainly motivated by the search for 'abundant high quality experiences, an openness to diversity of all kinds , and above else the opportunity to validate their identities as creative people' (Florida, 2005:36). The implications of this discourse have been that the creative industries institutionalize a new, post-materialist value make-up, long identified with the emerging new middle class of 'knowledge workers' or 'symbol analysts'(Bell, 1973, Reich, 1992, cf. Pratt, 2008).<sup>i</sup> The creative industries give what used to be anti-systemic values a systemic rationality and confer on them a new hegemony by means of which they are able re-shape the surrounding urban context, rendering it more tolerant, diverse and open to the experience-oriented lifestyle that the creative class embraces (cf. Brooks, 2000, Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999, Lloyd, 2006). Seen this way, the creative industries do not only generate economic growth, they also drive social and cultural modernization. Such assumptions have led policy makers to assume that the growth of creative industries and creative labor have intrinsically positive societal effects. As the recent UN report on

the Creative Economy proclaims: ‘The creative economy has the potential to generate income and jobs while promoting social inclusion, cultural diversity, and human development’ (UN, 2008: iii).

More recently however social scientists have begun to address the actual empirical conditions of labor in the creative industries. While these studies have been largely qualitative, focusing on small networks of creative producers, a common picture has begun to emerge, whether this be a matter of small entrepreneurs in the fashion industry (McRobbie, 1998), employees in the television industry (Hesmondagh & Baker, 2008, Christopherson, 2008), or computer programmers (Ross, 2003, Gill, 2002). The general findings have been that the creative industries are marked by strong and growing divisions between a small elite that can command high levels of market power, and a growing mass of workers whose skills are generic and in constant over-supply and who are, consequently, forced to accept low pay and insecure, or precarious forms of employment (whether this be self-employment, freelance work or short term contracts). Among this ‘creative precariat’ - as we shall call them - work is generally repetitive and mainly a matter of deploying generic social skills in the construction and maintenance of productive networks.<sup>ii</sup> Such ‘creative’ work is to a very limited extent a matter of ‘producing new ideas’ – to use Richard Florida’s definition - and workers have very little control over the actual work process. (Or rather, they are encouraged to use their autonomy and ability to self-organize, but within a highly restricted and controlled environment, Hesmondagh & Baker, 2008: 103). In other words, the actual labor process tends to resemble more that of other, non-creative sectors of the service or knowledge industries, like call-centers and branded retail chains (‘chainworkers’, as recent Italian activist researchers have called them), than the kind of intrinsically self-realizing and ‘cool’ work that Florida describes.<sup>iii</sup> Even so, most workers, even those whose labor tends to be repetitive and generic, are to a large extent motivated by a notion of their work as self-expressive and self-actualizing. To quote the introduction to the *Theory, Culture and Society*’s recent special issue on creative labor:

One of the most consistent findings on research on work within the creative industries is that it is experienced by most who are involved with it as profoundly satisfying and intensely pleasurable (at least some of the time). A vocabulary of love is repeatedly evinced in such studies, with work imbued with the features of the Romantic tradition of the artist, suffused with positive emotional qualities (von Osten, 2007). Research speaks of deep attachment, affective bindings, and to the idea of self-expression and self-actualization through work.

(Gill & Pratt, 2008:15)

In short, creative work is, to a large extent, 'passionate work', to use Angela McRobbie's expression (McRobbie, this issue).

In this article we will focus on this apparent contradiction between, on the one hand the generic, repetitive, and generally 'uncreative' nature of lower level creative labor, and on the other hand, the persistence of an 'ideology of creativity' as a strong motivational factor. Our findings show that among precarious workers in the Milan fashion industry, perceptions of work as creative and self-actualizing contrast with a reality marked by strong hierarchy, imposed hyper-flexibility, little autonomy and, in general, few possibilities for self-actualization. Nevertheless, such we will suggest that this 'ideology of creativity' should not simply be seen as an indication of a widespread 'false consciousness' among creative workers. After all, Althusser (1971, and many others thereafter) have shown us how ideologies are material and concrete 'realities'. Seen this way, the ideology of creativity should be understood both as a fundamental element to the overall constitution of creative labor, and as an important and valuable product of that labor. The ideology of creativity serves an important function in the construction of the subjectivity of the creative worker: his or her motivations, self-image and, importantly, notions of the value of his or her work. But this ideology of creativity also serves an important purpose in relation to the creative industries themselves. This has become particularly salient in relation to the contemporary (in the sense of pre-2008) brand-centric phase of the creative industries (and in particular the fashion industry), where the production of the spectacle of fashion itself with its connotations of 'coolness' and 'creativity' serves not only as a way to recruit talent and labor power, but also, and increasingly, as a

direct form of valorization, in so far as such forms of symbolic production serve to support and legitimate otherwise immeasurable brand values. Seen this way, an important role for creative labor is the production and maintenance of the very ideology of creativity by means of which the value of the product of the creative industries can be sustained.

This article is based on a collaborative study of lower level workers in the fashion industry in Milano that has been undertaken in spring 2009. With 'lower level fashion workers' we mean the people who perform the actual work that keeps the fashion system together. This population includes dependent workers and supervisors, but it excludes executives. It also excludes the important managerial cadres, often with a business school background, who manage the business aspects of global fashion brands. Our discussions are based on a sample of 25 qualitative interviews conducted by students at the University of Milano, 178 responses to a virally distributed online questioner, and ongoing discussions among academics, activists, creative professionals and students in eight weekly seminars. The study has been partly funded by the European Union.<sup>iv</sup>

The average age of our sample was 33.6 years and 23 per cent of our sample were over 40. This suggests that the conditions that we describe should not be taken as exclusive to young workers and new entrants into the field. (56 per cent have worked more than five years in the fashion industry). 67 per cent of our sample were women, and 60 per cent had a university education. This makes our sample fairly representative of the make up of the knowledge-work sector in Milano in general, and not just of the fashion industry.<sup>v</sup>

Since fashion has become an ever more brand-intensive business, a substantial part of the value chain involves communication work and event production. The result is that the fashion industry not only encompasses fashion design but also (or even chiefly) marketing, communication, event production, retail design, the production of consumer 'experiences'. This makes it tricky to define

the empirical area of study. We have solved this by addressing our survey to, and recruiting our interviewees among people who self-identify as fashion workers. This sampling technique, combined with the viral (non-random) distribution of our survey means that our results do not conform to strict definitions of representability. This means that our results need to be taken as a somewhat impressionistic picture of labour conditions in the fashion industry. They do not lend themselves to causal analysis.

## ii **The Fashion Industry in Milan: The Rise of Brands.**

Milan is a global center for fashion production, with one of the worlds largest agglomerations of fashion firms. Along with Paris, London and New York, Milan is also one of the worlds most important centers for fashion buying and consumption: the Milan Fashion Week attracts buyers and fashion journalists from all over the world; the central ‘fashion district’ along via Montenapoleone and via della Spiga attract wealthy consumers from all around the world, as well as less wealthy window shopping tourists groups from Japan and , lately, Russia. The city functions as a global show case for fashion. All in all the city counts some 12000 companies involved in fashion production (Power & Janson, n.d:6). In addition, large parts of the material production of fashion garments still takes place in the industrial districts located around the city, 20 out of Italy’s 65 garment districts are located around the city, in Lombardia and Veneto (Marchetti & Gramigna, 2007:13). Between 1996 and 2005 there has been a constant growth in the turn-over of the Italian fashion industry, and a constant shift in the value- added from the material production of garments to the immaterial production of design, events and communication. This is reflected in a shift in the structure of fashion employments within the province of Milan: Employment in material garment production has shown a slight decline, and employment in immaterial production, chiefly located within the city, a slight increase (from 4710 in 2001 to 5185 in 2005: These figures are however only indicative since the proportion of people with atypical forms of employment and who, consequently are poorly reflected by official labor statistics has boomed since 2003- when Italian

labour law was changed to accommodate such a greater variety of contractual forms. One large fashion company studied by Marchetti & Gramigna went from 75 per cent of all employees in regular full time employment in 2000 to 39 per cent in 2006, Marchetti & Gramigna, 2007: 47). This general shift from material to immaterial production is consistent with the transformation of the make up of the overall economy of the Lombardy region (where the fastest growing sectors have been immaterial 'knowledge work' and construction, cf. Bonomi, 2008), it also reflects a general transformation of the business logic of the fashion industry; from an emphasis on creativity and production, to an emphasis on communication and brand.

The growing importance of brands in relation to products originates with the figure of the fashion designer and the institutional developments that have occurred around (mostly) him. Corporate investments in fashion designers with strong brands attached to their names, like Armani or Versace, gradually transformed business models that prevailed within the industry. With the new importance of brand name, it became crucial to impose brand consistency in new ways. Indeed, it can be argued that the very choice of resorting to strong brands through long-term strategic alliances between financial capital and designers was in itself a reaction to the increasing volatility of consumer demand that marked the fashion market in the 1980s and 1990s. (The share of fashion garments on discount sale, a good indicator of the unpredictability of demand, grew from 7 per cent in 1970 to 35 per cent in 1995, Ricchetti, 2006:35). As a result of this new need to impose brand consistency the fashion industry saw a substantial growth of the immaterial *vis-à-vis* the material part of the value chain. (This development was further strengthened by the speeding up of turn-over time and the development of a new kind of fast-fashion geared to an almost continuous turn over of collections, which became possible within the controlled market segments that strong brands could create. More recent successes brands like Zara or H & M would perfect this model reducing the shelf life of garments and other articles to a couple of weeks , or even days.) The result was a transformation of the value chain of the fashion industry into a more diffuse model where formerly

peripheral activities like communication and retail now came to occupy central positions, and where, paradoxically perhaps, the 'creative space' available for designers was significantly reduced as product innovation became ever more the 'network effect' of an extended chain of actors. Indeed it can be argued that the new brand centric model of fashion, and the corresponding increase in employed forms of immaterial labor, like communication and events, represent an internalization and subsumption of the relatively autonomous social effervescence or the urban 'counter culture' that, in previous decades, had functioned as an important source of product and trend development (cf. Frank, 1997). If, in a previous model fashion was largely a matter of responding to trends and fads that arouse beyond the direct control of the industry, and success depended on the ability to interpret and transform such trends into consumer goods, the contemporary brand centric model builds to a large extent on the ability to control the production of trend and fashion through communication strategies and the provision of pre-structured experiences.

The branditization of fashion signaled a shift away from a business model that was primarily geared towards following the dynamics of consumer tastes, towards a model directed at accumulating long term profits through the cultivation of brand presence and consistency. This brand equity was subsequently valorized in two ways. First, a growing market for branded, low cost accessories like sunglasses, wallets, key-rings, belts and perfume. Indeed for one large fashion brand studied by Marchetti & Gramigna (2007:42), the proportion of value-added coming from such accessories virtually doubled from 20 per cent in 1995 to 38 per cent in 2005. Second, a strong brand becomes a way of attracting capital on financial markets. According to Interbrand, the value of Italian fashion brands (along with fashion brands in general) sky-rocketed by 50 to 100 per cent between 2004 and 2008.<sup>iv</sup> In this situation, the production of relatively expensive fashion garments for an upper middle class markets becomes a secondary activity. Indeed, the production of such high quality garments becomes one channel among many for the crucial construction of brand equity, which can be subsequently valorized either on the growing accessories market (directed at less prosperous



consumers) or on financial markets. In this new model, immaterial production, like communication, the production of events and the construction of experiential retail space became highly controlled and managed activities. In other words, the construction of the (ideological) reality of fashion itself, its presence in the urban environment as a 'cool' and 'creative' world of its own, with its own institutions and structures (shops, galleries, nightlife, crowds of smart young people, etc.), of fashion brand, was internalized as part of the fashion business. The resulting branditization of the city centre has contributed a significant increase in urban real estate prices: in Milano the price per square meter in the central fashion street, via Montenapoleone, doubled between 2000 and 2006 (Cietta, 2006:105).

### iii **Producing Brand for the Fashion Industry.**

The majority of our interviewees, and of the respondents to our survey are engaged in producing the kinds of relations and events that keep the fashion system together, rather than in actually designing garments (only 5 per cent of our sample claim to be working with design). Such brand-work is generally underpaid, precarious and marked by long hours of hard work. Only 31 per cent of our sample had a regular employment contract. And out of those 31 per cent, only 29 per cent were permanently employed: in all 9 per cent of the whole sample. The most common forms of short term employment were project-related contracts lasting, generally, less than a year (only 11 per cent last more than one year). Flexible forms of self employment, or what Sergio Bologna and Andrea Fumagalli (1997) call 'second generation autonomous labor' are also widespread, encompassing 77 per cent of those without regular employment contracts. Median monthly income in the sample was 1.150 euro. It remained below 1500 euro in all age groups up to 36 and above. Below 30 years, the median income was under 1000 euro. Incomes below 500 euro were fairly evenly distributed across all age groups (with a slight prevalence in the under 25 year olds). In addition 60 per cent of the sample claim to have experienced delays and other problems in getting paid. Given the cost of living in Milano (ranked as number twenty among the world's most expensive cities <sup>vi</sup>), such

income levels are clearly insufficient. Indeed, sixty per cent claim not to be able to maintain a style of life that reflects their needs, 67 per cent are unable to raise a family, 80 per cent do not have a pension, 26 per cent have borrowed money for personal consumption and 66 per cent have relied on their parents for economic support in the last two years.

A large group of our younger respondents earn less than 800 Euro a month (31 per cent of the under 25 year olds, 25 per cent of the 25-30 and 35 per cent of the 30- 35). To a large extent these are probably interns (*stagisti* -in particular the 12.5 per cent of the under 25 year-olds who claim to have no income what so ever). Originally conceived as a form of apprenticeship, interns are systematically used by the fashion industry as well as the creative industries in general, often to cover the most menial and routine aspects of work. They are generally subjected to tight discipline, including frequent cases of mobbing (*my boss will always pick out one intern whom he considers to be not so bright and soon enough the rest of us will start thinking that way about her as well. There is this girl working with me now, poor girl, sometimes I would want to defend her, but I must think of myself<sup>vii</sup>*), and competition is strong, each knowing her or himself to be easily replaceable.

Successful interns will generally be offered a second or even a third internship, and then some form of paid employment (usually a short term contract paid less than 1000 Euro a month). In all they will be working for free for up to a year before seeing any kind of compensation (apart from the occasional reimbursement of travel costs – 32 per cent of our sample live outside of the city borders, in the hinterland: Milan is a city of commuters, population grows from 1.5 million to four million in a regular working day). However the promotion to ‘regular’ employment does not seem to change conditions very much. Labor conditions are overwhelmingly marked by long hours (full time workers in our sample worked on average 48 hours a week, but peaks of 60 or 70 hours were not uncommon) and intense forms of exploitation together with tight office discipline, verging on downright mobbing. For many, lunch breaks and doctors appointments were an optional.

Work remains generally underpaid, and precarious conditions persist even after several years of

employment. Indeed, keeping workers in precarious conditions seems to be a deliberate policy on the part of many employers. This undoubtedly renders them more docile and weakens their bargaining power. Generally the working environment seems to be marked by strong hierarchies (63 per cent of our sample see their work environment as 'hierarchical'), and a strong division between workers and bosses (who are free to do more or less as they please). This strong distinction between workers and management is also reflected in salary differences, where bosses can make around Euro 10.000 a month, ordinary workers make around 1.500 and interns, at the most 350. <sup>viii</sup>

Indeed, bosses behave with supreme arrogance, and exhibit the kind of schizophrenia that comes with absolute power.

**Q: How's your relation to your boss?**

It's love and hate. We go for dinner together and there are moments when we're really close. She's a great person, really likeable, and it's wonderful to have an *aperitivo* together. Then at work she just goes crazy and loses any sense of proportion, she becomes something out of this world. The main problem is to make her understand that when you've been working non-stop for maybe three weeks you have the right to take a day off. It's also a matter of productivity. She really wears people out. When I work I really work, time flies when I work. But at a certain point I raise my eyes and realize that I've been working for 12 hours, going on like this for two weeks without a single day off. I 'don't think that's OK. <sup>ix</sup>

**Q: Tell me about your boss?**

He's a piece of shit; a hysteric fagot (sic!) who uses us for his own pleasure as a form of anti-stress. <sup>x</sup>

There seems to be a clear separation between the world of fashion workers, and the world of fashion executives, they belong to two different worlds, one is marked by the everyday drudgery of long hours of underpaid work (as one woman interviewee adequately put it: *they are stealing our lives*, xviii), and the other by the glamorous world of fashion events, parties and illicit drugs.

I'm only a graphic designer, I am nobody in here, I am not an important person who can participate and grow professionally. If you're in certain mechanisms you'll have access, not so much to private parties, as to fashion shows and other such occasions, like my superiors do.

[...]

**Q: Do you use drugs? Are they generally used in the environment where you work?**

Personally I do not use them, but in the environment there is a lot, it's trendy, it's the environment that makes you use certain substances, when you move in certain circles or networks. You see, the access to these things is limited. For me, who's a simple graphic designer, it's forbidden. For the people at the next level, it's expected. We are at the lowest level, we do the real work, they are mostly busy creating image. <sup>xi</sup>

And these two levels seem to be separated by strong social barriers, often made up of family or friendship ties. Internal mobility seems to be infrequent and generally not based on merit (63 per cent of our sample claim that promotions are generally not transparent). Access to executive positions largely depends on belonging to the right kind of networks. Indeed, the lack of mobility from the lower ranks of precarious workers to the upper ranks of management has been underlined as a structural problem in the Italian fashion industry. The lack of internal mobility in the sector means that there is little turn-over in top management and that consequently, young 'talents' flee abroad (d'Ovvidio, 2008).

#### iv **Passionate Work?**

Despite such dire conditions, underpaid and over-worked fashion workers exhibit high levels of job satisfaction. Seventy five percent of our sample declared to be generally satisfied with their work, and levels of satisfaction remain fairly even across income clusters (with the exception of the under 500 euro and the 1000-1300 euro clusters, where only 54 per cent claimed to be satisfied<sup>xii</sup>).

Sources of job satisfaction fell primarily into two categories: First, the perception of work as autonomous and flexible (11 per cent indicated flexible hours as their main source of satisfaction, 20 per cent indicated 'autonomy' and 12 per cent 'to be able to shift between projects and working environments'). Second, the creativity and learning experience provided by work itself (17 per cent indicated 'creativity', 15 per cent 'acquired skills and knowledge'- and among the qualitative interviews, the ability to 'learn new things' occurred frequently as a source of satisfaction).

However, while respondents to our survey, as well as our interviewees tended to characterize their work as autonomous and creative in the abstract, their concrete experiences were generally quite different. Autonomy was generally very circumscribed; bosses expect total obedience during the working day (and sometimes also at night). Working hours are flexible in the sense that they can be easily extended beyond the required eight hours a day, but employees have very little control of

their work hours. That 'there are no fixed working hours' seems to mean that there is no end to work!

Indeed people with project-oriented contracts are usually required to be on the job all of the time, and our interviews contain numerous stories about not having time to go out for lunch, go to the dentist, spend time with friends and family etc. (66 per cent of our sample claimed that they often work outside of regular working hours, at night, during weekends and on holidays). Nor do our interviewees seem to have much control over what they do during work hours. Work appears to be fragmented and without structure; autonomy and flexibility are generally imposed, either by bosses or by the constant need to cope with high levels of fluidity and complexity. Fashion workers need to be hyper-flexible and adapt to any situation. (A frequent way of describing their work was '*I do whatever my boss tells me.*')

**Q: What does a typical working day look like?**

It's strange and bizarre, because you can never know or plan what you will have to do. My working day is really unforeseeable, it all depends on what ever emergencies are there in the morning when I arrive. <sup>xiii</sup>

The same thing goes for creativity, the second major source of satisfaction. Most of the work seems to be mainly a matter of executing orders from above, and to perform rather menial, supportive tasks. This seems to be particularly true for large fashion brands, where the imperative to maintain brand consistency means that 'creativity' is almost exclusively exercised at the top.

This is how it works. There are the bosses (the parents [in the family firm]). They usually think up an idea for a collection based a bit on older collections, a bit on the general style and a bit on the company image, adjusting it all to contemporary trends. First of all this idea needs to be in sync with our target, and not too innovative, because that doesn't sell. Once the idea is fleshed out, they analyze the competition and their possible collections. <sup>xiv</sup>

**Q: Can any store decorate their windows as they like or is there a general directive?**

There is a directive. All the stores must present the same image. If they decide that the Monte Napoleone store must show this or that product in their window from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 25<sup>th</sup> of February, you'll find the same product in the windows in New York, Tokyo, Paris and Abu Dhabi, it'll always be the same in that period. And the same goes for the decorations inside the stores. <sup>xv</sup>

Most of our interviewees would rather bring up what they do outside of work, or what they would like to do with their work as examples of 'creativity'. (A typical expression would be, *I am creative when they don't wing-clip me*<sup>xvi</sup>). The general impression is that 'creativity' rather than describing an actual reality, functions as a way of giving sense to and legitimizing a labor process that is marked by high levels of fragmentation and insecurity.

Significantly, discussions about 'creativity' would quickly turn away from work, to focus instead on the creative lifestyle. Indeed, a lot of the satisfaction derived from 'creativity' appears to derive mainly from the possibility to imagine oneself as belonging to a particular creative scene, with the accompanying consumer based lifestyle: a 'common world' made up of parties, intense socialization among colleagues, the occasional party or 'celebrity moment', common consumption interests and a common lifestyle.

We write 'possibility to imagine oneself as belonging' because, clearly, this lifestyle is mostly lived in a vicarious way. To some extent this is so because the creative precariat is generally excluded from the higher level networks around which access to parties and fashionable events are structured, but chiefly this is the case because of the sheer economic impossibility of living the 'high life' on 1000 Euro a month (or less). (Although respondents to our survey claimed to spend, on average 150 euro a month on clothes, quite a sum given that the median income was a 1150 euro.) Instead access to the 'fashionable world of fashion' is handed out piecemeal by bosses, as little crumbs that further increase the appetite of creative workers, particularly as they can imagine themselves having more complete access in the future, if only they manage to build the right kind of networks.

Indeed, here as well as otherwise, the idea of just rewards in the future is a strong component of the ideological make-up of the fashion precariat. In Italy, this is known as *'fare la gavetta'*, or, to suffer a prolonged period of hard work and low pay with a view to reaping one's just rewards in the future.

The idea of an identification with the world of fashion, today or tomorrow is what is generally invoked to motivate endurance of long hours of under-paid work in relation to oneself, as well as one's friends and family.

For workers in the Milan fashion industry, creativity and in particular the satisfaction derived from 'creativity' seems to be to no small extent a matter of identity, rather than practices. Their main satisfaction is derived from the ability to belong, or imagine themselves belonging in the future, to a particular scene and lifestyle (even if vicariously lived), that their job gives them. Fashion work is mainly passionate work, also because it is generally underpaid! Indeed, this separation of the identitarian value of work from its monetary value is visible in the interesting observation that while most respondents to our survey indicate high satisfaction with their work, most also indicate low satisfaction with their wage. This clearly shows that their work is routinely valued in non-monetary terms

v. **Conclusion: The Ideology of Creativity**

The separation of the identity value of work from its monetary value is quite astonishing: it would be difficult conceiving of a sample of Fordist factory workers responding in the same way. It suggests that, at least in the imagination of the fashion precariat, the 'labour theory of value' has been effectively suspended! Similar observations however emerge from other research on new, emerging, non-monetary conceptions of the value of work or workers, like the rise of reputation-based value systems in the creative industries, or of 'self-branding' within the managerial class (Hearn, 2008, Illouz, 2007). In all of these instances a similar logic seems to be at work. The value of work as well as one's own value as a worker/subject are increasingly conceived in terms of identity and life-style. How can we account for the strength of such identitarian conceptions of value?

One possible explanation would point at the very power of the ideology of creativity. In Italy, like in the rest of the west, the last decades have seen a strong and enduring celebration of creativity and the 'creative lifestyle' in popular culture, as well as in higher education. This has encompassed a consumer culture that celebrates self-actualization and originality (supported by a growing media attention on design, home decoration, cooking and other forms of 'postmodern' DIY pursuits); a constant focus on celebrity artists and designers; the growth of urban milieus that cater to the consumer and nightlife tastes of the creative class; the growing social presence of luxury brands and luxury consumption and, importantly, the proliferation of secondary degrees in the Arts, media and design. (In Milano the last decade has seen a proliferation of heavily advertised and branded design degrees. There were 11.000 graduates from design and fashion schools, compared to 3000 new jobs created in this sector between 1991 and 2001, Bonomi, 2008.) However another important dimension is the absence of an alternative ideology, or better, an alternative definition of reality. In part this is the case because, as we argued above, the process of branditization of fashion has entailed an inclusion and subsumption of the autonomous forms of urban social effervescence ('the counterculture') that used to serve as a source of immaterial innovation, and their transformation into controlled and salaried forms of communication work. This internalization of immaterial labor has also transformed the urban environment. The fashion industry and local authorities have come to view the urban environment as a 'creative city', that is as an accumulation of urban symbolic capital to be managed rationally and valorized in terms of events and fairs (like the influential Milan Fashion Week, Powers & Janson, n.d.). This new conception of the city as a productive resource has been paralleled by gentrification, urban branding and the surveillance and control of autonomous forms of night life and social effervescence in general. The effects have been that the urban spaces out of which alternative conceptions of subjectivity could grow have been greatly reduced (Niessen, 2009). Like the luxury store in the fashion quadrant around via Montenapoleone, fashion workers live in another city, distant from the everyday realities of the metropolis and structured by the ideology of creativity and its related events and institutions. (This observation can be corroborated



not only be the generally low levels of political interest in our sample, but also by the fact that only 32 per cent of the respondents claim to have a sense of involvement with the general life of the city). This means of course that 'creativity' remains as one of the few symbolic tools that fashion workers can use to make sense of a work process that remains fragmented and hyper-flexible.

A third reason for the strength of the ideology of creativity is that much of the actual work performed by our subjects involves and builds on the very communicative and affective qualities that are otherwise deployed to create subjectivity and consciousness. Work largely consists in maintaining the social relations that make the world of fashion possible, organizing events, parties, happenings, communicative campaigns, keeping contacts that are important for oneself and one's future career, as well as maintaining the bosses networks. Frequently this relational work goes on after working hours, in the bars or parties that form the institutional basis for the world of fashion, and where the fashion precariat is sometimes invited to constitute the necessary 'critical mass' (cf. Arvidsson, 2007). Along with Paolo Virno (2004) we could argue that fashion workers seem to lack a political consciousness (or a consciousness of anything outside the world of fashion for that matter) because their political agency has already been put to work, and for long hours, in the creation of the relations and events that make up the world of fashion and its brands. This continuous participation in 'the world of fashion' means that few fashion workers have much time for other kinds of social relations. Indeed socialization among colleagues is intense. In short, most fashion workers are intensely absorbed within the world of fashion to the point that they lack alternative standards of evaluation and judgement. What is more, this intense absorption seems to take place without the formation of a common understanding among fashion workers. The atmosphere is strongly competitive, and success is routinely presented as contingent on the ability to manipulate social relations. (Even though they socialize intensely with colleagues, few of our respondents claim that their colleagues are also 'friends'). Like true Latourians, fashion workers have social networks, but they have no 'social' (Latour, 2005). Their work and their life have blended together

into a 'creative world' with its own standards of value and its own definition of reality, they are absorbed in it to the point of being virtually unable to imagine anything else.

In Milano (as well as in many other contexts) the construction of a powerful ideology of creativity has been part of a general shift towards what contemporary observers call a biopolitical governance of labor (Hardt & Negri, 2004). Since, for fashion workers as well as for other creative or 'knowledge' workers (du Gay, 2007, Grey, 1994), the production of value and the production of subjectivity tend to coincide, the provision of forms of subjectivity become a way to shape and govern the valorization process. In the case of the Milan fashion world this has occurred through a subsumption of the previous countercultural lifestyles through which autonomous forms of social effervescence unfolded, and their transformation into a de-politicized ideology of creativity, which promotes highly individualized subjectivity with little or no relations to the overall social world. Such trends towards the individualization and de-politicization of immaterial labor seem to be something of a general feature of the neoliberal phase of informational capitalism. (cf. Abercrombie, 1991, Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999, du Gay, 2007). In the Milan fashion industry it has coincided with the rise of brand-centered business models and the corresponding internalization and rationalization of immaterial production. 'Passion', it appears, has become a means of production, systematically promoted and put to work as part of the institutional framework within which brand values are produced.

- i The expression creative ‘class’ is largely colloquial, it is doubtful whether the loose agglomeration of professions referred to by Florida can be understood as a homogenous class in any sense. Indeed, there seems to be large and important divisions within this ‘class’ (Arvidsson, 2007, cf. Peck, 2005).
- ii The term precariat ( or *precariato*) comes out of recent Italian labor activism, and in particular the San Precario figure. In Latin the term *precarius* means both ‘insecure’ and ‘unstable’ and ‘ something that has been obtained through prayers’, concomitantly the condition of precarious work can be said to consist in a combination of insecurity, instability, and subordination. On the development of this term, see Tari & Vanni, 2005.
- iii See [www.chainworkers.org](http://www.chainworkers.org)
- iv Project: EDUF-N / EDUFashion Network ref: 502439-LLP-1-2009-SI-ERASMUS-ECUE
- v See [http://www.istat.it/dati/dataset/20090108\\_00/](http://www.istat.it/dati/dataset/20090108_00/)
- vi ‘THE MOST EXPENSIVE CITIES IN THE WORLD  
ECA International survey (June 2009)’, available at [http://www.citymayors.com/economics/expensive\\_cities2.html](http://www.citymayors.com/economics/expensive_cities2.html)  
consulted July 23, 2009.
- vii Interview, Woman, early twenties, Intern in a television production company, July, 2009 (all translations from the Italian are our own).
- viii Interview, Man, early twenties, works in advertising agency, March, 2009.
- ix Interview, Woman, early thirties, works for major fashion brand, March, 2009.
- x Interview, Woman, mid twenties, works for major fashion brand, March 2009.
- xi Interview, woman, early twenties, fashion designer, March, 2009.
- xii There seems to be a slight progression in pay as people grow older, with the exception of the 30-35 group, where a lot of people remain at levels of pay around or below 1000 Euro. This is also the group that exhibits the lowest level of job satisfaction. One possible explanation could be that a significant number get stuck at low level jobs, and do not move up the career level as they grow older. Those are also the people with the greatest reason to be unsatisfied.
- xiii Interview, Man, early twenties, works for chain of concept stores, March, 2009.
- xiv Interview, Woman, early thirties, works for major fashion brand, March, 2009.
- xv Interview Man, late thirties, manager for large fashion brand, March, 2009.
- xvi Interview, woman, early twenties, fashion designer, March, 2009.

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