Individualization, Gender and Cultural Work

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Abstract

In the 'new' economy, the virtues of creative and cultural industry production are widely promoted and idealized. For women, set free from their 'feudal chains', the 'cool creative and egalitarian' (Gill, 2002, p.70) cultural economy – particularly in areas such new media, music, design and fashion - appears to offer paths to workplace freedom. But is this really so? Using evidence from the digital 'new media' sector, this paper builds on the work of Lash (1994) and Adkins (1999), which suggests that the ostensibly 'detraditionalized' cultural economy continues to play host to some markedly regressive 'traditional' social structures. In particular it is shown how the new media sector exhibits some clear continuity with the 'old' economy in terms of some enduring gender inequality and discrimination. However, more positively, evidence is presented of how women have been able to take advantage of individualized workplace structures and develop more autonomous and reflexive workplace roles.

Keywords: individualization, tradition, gender, new media production

Introduction

Despite its routine depiction as inherently 'cool, creative and egalitarian' (Gill 2002, p.70), there is a clear disparity between the rhetoric of the 'new', creative economy and the realities encountered by workers charged with its reproduction (Adkins, 1999; Banks, 2007; Gill, 2002; 2007; McRobbie, 2002; Morini, 2007; Perrons, 2003; Richards and Milestone, 2000; Ross, 2003; Swanson and Wise, 2000; Tams, 2002; Willis and Dex, 2003; Wyatt and Henwood, 2000). This paper provides evidence from a range of sources critical of the ways in which the discourse of 'flexibility' and 'creative freedom' has been allowed to mask some fundamental inequalities and discriminatory practices in cultural work [1]. In particular, following the work of other new economy critics, we argue that the organization of ostensibly 'detraditionalized' and 'reflexive' cultural industries work can enhance the possibility for the reapplication of some rather 'traditional' forms of gender discrimination and inequality.

Firstly, we challenge the claim (evinced by Ulrich Beck, amongst others) that the detraditionalization and correspondent individualization of social relations leads to a release of actors from inherited gender fates. The idea that gender (along with ethnicity and class) has become an inadequate category for understanding the constitution of societies, has been widely assumed in the light of the decline of the industrial society that comprehensively secured and institutionalized this form of social stratification. For example, as Anthony Giddens has it, in late modernity, increasingly 'divisions between men and women, up to and including the most intimate connections between gender, sexuality and self-identity, are publicly placed in question' (1994, p.106). Yet, specifically, following the critiques of Beck's individualization thesis provided by Lash (1994) and subsequently Adkins (1999), we confirm that so-called 'reflexive' forms of cultural production, rather than leading to the detraditionalization of social relations (as has been widely argued), and the dissolution of sedimented forms of social power, can exert what has been termed a (paradoxically) 'retraditionalizing' effect. That is, in contrast to the conventional assumption that tradition is made invisible by the forces of social change, Lash and Adkins have sought to demonstrate how reflexive production is in fact premised on the relentless construction of *new* tradition in order to enable firms to adequately pursue

accumulation. Tradition, then, it is argued, does not die in individualized modernity, but regroups, reconvenes and is reapplied, and is evidenced here in the ways in which patterns of gender discrimination retain some significant purchase on the organization of cultural, and in particular, 'new media' [2] work.

Secondly, while confirming Adkins' observations, we also seek to challenge their general applicability by highlighting examples where women have – to some degree – been able to create their own reflexive careers in the contexts of cultural work. The idea that individualization leads to 'not just a flattening, but a deepening of the self' (Lash and Urry, 1994, p.31) is evidenced in the ways that women in new media employment exercise self-reflection and choice in the search for more meaningful and autonomous cultural work careers.

Beck, Gender and Tradition

While Beck (1992; see also Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) emphasises that individualization is as much a compulsion as a choice – we are condemned to it whether we like it or not – his reading contains a strong utopian thread in that he suggests the possibility that detraditionalization processes may bring about some emancipation from the more conservative and oppressive of traditional social forms – including the naturalization of gender.

How is this possible? For Beck, we must begin by examining the changing relationship between the arenas of industrial production and family-based reproduction. As is well known, capitalist production, at least since the early 19th Century, has based its efficacy on the separation of male and female roles, with men acting as the breadwinning head of household and women as homemaker and nurturer of the next generation of workers. As Beck avers, wage labour presupposes housework. The nuclear family has also provided the context for the successful reproduction of capitalist, bourgeois values – hard work, economic aspiration, punctuality, respect, diligence and so on – so ensuring system stability. To effect continuity, Modern women and men were more intensively ascribed with essentialized gender characteristics, and the language of biological necessity was widely invoked to explain away the new edifices of social construction. Modern societies were thus able to successfully

develop through exploiting this 'natural' complementarity between male and female roles and ensuring continuity in the balance between the public and private spheres.

This hangover from the 'Middle Ages', as Beck describes it, is argued to be fast evaporating in the heat of accelerated 'reflexive modernization' and individualization processes – he argues that now, more than ever before, women are being released from their 'feudal' chains. The reasons for this are well documented; the expansion of educational opportunities for women, political organizing and campaigning by women's movements, and the fact that capitalism has both co-opted and attracted unprecedented numbers of women into the labour market. This has had the effect of unstitching the seams of the nuclear family and de-differentiating male and female roles. The entrance of women into paid work has, for Beck, squeezed out the last remnants of feudalism and ensured the drive to a more reflexively modern realm of production, where everyone is (at least potentially) an active and available worker.

The movement of women into the labour market is thus part explained through women's own desires to achieve economic independence and escape their 'natural fate', and is part accounted for by the ways in which capitalism must secure its own future through seeking new sources of cheaper, flexible labour. On the one hand this can appear negative, as modernization demands that individuals operate unfettered by any constraint on their abilities to trade and execute their labour power. Everyone must be available for work and the values of work must override all other considerations, even to the extent of usurping those traditional family and kinship roles sedimented in early industrial society; Beck envisages the outcome of this scenario:

> Thought through to its ultimate consequence, the market model of modernity implies
> a society without families and children. Everyone must be independent, free for the
> demands of the market in order to guarantee his/her economic existence. The market
> subject is ultimately the single individual 'unhindered' by a relationship, marriage or
> family. Correspondingly, the ultimate market society is a childless society – unless the
> children grow up with mobile, single, fathers and mothers (Beck, 1992, p.116).

Even now, many would argue that we are witnessing the imminent triumph of production over the sphere of reproduction, as market values assert their supremacy over all others, and the family (and other forms of non-market organization) apparently fade from view. A clear contradiction of market rationality is that it will eventually destroy family life, that necessary foundation for its reproduction and effective survival.

Yet, for Beck, the liberation of men and women from historical gender fates might effect more positive outcomes. While conservative critics continue to lament the 'death of the family', it is clear that the accelerated entrance of women into paid work and the expanded opportunity to escape inherited fate is an emancipatory outcome of the shift from an industrial to a post-industrial society (or from 'first' to 'second' modernity as Beck has it). While Beck is aware of the risks and uncertainties of the transition to a more individualized society, he is also optimistic that beyond the traditional nuclear family, new forms of social commons may emerge that enable the satisfactory accommodation of men's and women's individualized ambitions - though what these may look like remains, as yet, unclear.

In short, for Beck, individualization offers the promise of liberation from the fixities of pre-given feminine or masculine identities, where women tend to appear naturally-endowed with domestic skills, and only men innately equipped with economically productive potential. Further, given the 'openness' of the occupational structure, it is at least possible that individualization may provide a chance for women (and men) to invest labour with a more affective and personal sense of meaning than industrial societies were able to provide. Of course, as Bauman (2000) argues, we should be wary of those who suggest work offers opportunities to 'make of oneself what one will' and that individuals now have the unfettered opportunity to fulfil their fantasies and live their dreams. We should also be suspicious when neo-liberals claim that there are no longer any barriers to progress in the form of 'glass ceilings' and the like. Yet, while recognising these problems, it is not unreasonable to suggest that one of the consequences of 'flexible' economic restructuring, coupled with more 'personalized' and 'aestheticized' occupations, a diversity of gender roles and putatively enhanced geographical and

social mobility, may be a less rigid and prescriptive occupational structure, more open to a wider array of social groups and more amenable to self-directed and socially ambitious subjects.

However, in the wake of social transformation new threats as well as opportunities are revealed. While individualized work would seem to suggest that women now have the opportunity to pursue roles and career prizes historically denied to them, any claims that the differentiated landscape of work has now transformed into a level playing field are undoubtedly premature. Indeed, a number of critics have suggested that culturalized work may actually be inciting the formation of new, yet somewhat *traditional*, patterns of discrimination and inequality, rather than uniformly alleviating their more pernicious effects.

Retraditionalization, Work and Gender

While, conventionally, sociologists have tended to argue that modernization leads inevitably to detraditionalization, others have conversely claimed that 'tradition' is constantly being created and reasserted as modernization proceeds. Indeed, Lash (1994) takes this latter view, identifying in particular the resuscitation in the new economy of 'traditional' social relations at the cutting edge of information, cultural and knowledge-based production. Here, work relations appear to be characterised by a prevalence of 'pre-modern' (hence 'traditional') arrangements; in particular the growth of informal workplace communities based on non cash-nexus relations of trust, reciprocity and embedded forms of knowledge and information exchange (see also Booth, 1994).

Lash argues that at the same time as work is becoming ever more competitive and market-driven (and thus, according to conventional political economy critiques, disembedded from close quarters control), the social relations required to lubricate exchange turn back towards stylized pre-modern interactions based on interpersonal communication and information exchange, rather than being mediated through bureaucratic 'arms length' management. For Lash, the use of soft, creative 'decontrolled' management and encouraging workers to form their own embedded, co-operative structures of production have now become cornerstone principles of the post-industrial economy. As he puts it, now, 'pre-modern and communal-traditional forms of regulation (are) conducive to

information flow and acquisition which are the structural conditions of reflexive production' (1994, p.127). This has progressive potential for as workers are being forced to become self-resourcing, they are also becoming committed to forging new embedded community structures that help mediate the production of informational, cultural and knowledge based goods. In reflexive production workers are also more likely to inhabit an environment where the internal rewards of meaning and respect are cultivated and more highly valued. Thus, while recognizing that reflexive production is not universally progressive (there remain many 'reflexivity losers' as he puts it), Lash asserts the case for a constant, innovative and progressive *re*traditionalization at the heart of reflexive production.

Adkins and the 'retraditionalization of gender'

While Lash is cautiously optimistic about the social possibilities of retraditionalization, Adkins (1999) provides a more critical account detailing the specific and deleterious consequences of *gender* retraditionalization in the context of cultural work. She identifies the irony that despite the expansion of a culturalized labour process that emphasises certain pre-modern modes of organisation such as networks, reciprocity, informality and so on (all forms of sociality historically linked to women), amidst an apparently more open occupational structure, there is in fact a profound 'exclusion of women from these reflexivized occupations' (ibid, p.126). Why should this be so?

Adkins first acknowledges it is the family and domestic labour of women (as non-cultural workers) that ensures men are furnished with opportunities to take up those new reflexive roles that demand total flexibility and independence from familial time claims – primarily, thanks to dutiful women, men are simply more able to become reflexive cultural workers, just as they have historically enjoyed greater access to labour markets across most industrial sectors. Additionally, she offers that as long as those working women who *are* publicly engaged in cultural industry jobs remain charged with fulfilling their traditional caring roles in the private sphere, this can deprive them of the opportunity to adequately fulfil reflexive occupational roles, since there is a clear difficulty in juggling these often competing time claims. Both these examples suggest that reflexive work opportunities, for both men

and women, are closely linked to the ongoing requirements of women to conduct domestic and familial labour.

However it is the endurance and renewal of family relations of appropriation *within* the internal operations of cultural work that is the main focus of Adkins' critique. She demonstrates how women in cultural work tend to be allocated administrative, caring, or support occupations, rather than cutting-edge and creative reflexive roles, a consequence of what she refers to as a 'thoroughgoing institutionalization of individualization which is dependent on a traditional family division of labour' (ibid, p.129). Specifically, she reveals how the tourism and hospitality industries, those seemingly most (post)modern of industries, show an increasing propensity to employ 'husband and wife' teams for the management of enterprises and establishments; as she comments:

> What is of significance here…..is where such married teams are mobilized both the relations between 'managers' and the production of goods and services in such establishments are significantly based on family relations of appropriation; or on what might be regarded as non-market, non-cash nexus, *traditional* relations [her emphasis] (ibid., p.130).

Adkins details how tourism and leisure firms often recruit married couples as managers, showing a preference to employ only the husband as a 'husband-manager'. Here, wives are assumed to constitute part of the husband's labour input. Wives' roles are often unspecified and assumed to be determined by the husband-manager who is more often charged with full responsibility for the management of the labour process. Wives may possess no formal contract of employment. In this way wives are not only assumed to work 'for' the husband, but through the moral imperative of family and marriage relations can actually be called upon to devote labour time above and beyond the call of duty – working longer hours, 'mucking in' and helping out as and when required. This results in a situation where, as Adkins puts it, wives are not workers, 'rather they are working as wives' (ibid, p.130). The appropriation of family labour in this context serves men well, for it is they, rather than their wives, who are the self-regulating, autonomous and reflexivized workers, while women

must rely on their husbands for status and security; indeed it is the existence of such family relations of appropriation that frees up men to fulfil reflexive roles.

Thus, Adkins emphasizes how the materially embedded structures of cultural work contain within them the potential to exclude women from reflexive roles. That is, the construction of more traditional, fluid, personalized forms of informal association creates conditions under which the appropriation of family-based relations might be enhanced. Lash overlooks the ways in which the apparently progressive resuscitation of traditional community relations is also likely to involve the re-establishment of *gendered divisions of community labour*, a process that has tended historically to allocate women more passive, supportive and caring roles. Thus, in contrast to Lash, Adkins suggests that the tradition that is being (re)created in reflexive accumulation is not simply that which is associated with more harmonious, trust-laden pre-modern societies, but that which has been historically developed to aid modern (and pre-modern) societies' desired separation of male and female roles. As she suggests, properly understood, tradition is as much about human motivations to secure 'power, money and status' (including the power of men over women) as it is the creation of communitarian utopias. Furthermore, what Adkins implies, but McRobbie (2002) more squarely suggests, is that now the possibilities of *avoiding* this separation of roles in cultural work is made ever more difficult by the widespread disavowal of those forms of organizing that were specifically designed to challenge such workplace discrimination. In the new cultural economy, with its emphasis on 'individual talent', initiatives like equal opportunities legislation, anti-discrimination policies, collective representation and so on tend to be viewed as inappropriate hangovers from the 'old' economy, structures that inhibit creativity and introduce elements of drag into the necessarily fast and free-flowing process of reflexive production.

In conclusion, then, for Adkins, unfettered individualization is seen as catalytic to the re-mobilization of 'historical' social arrangements of gender, ones prematurely and too airily dismissed as bygone relics of less enlightened times; as she concludes:

…far from being transgressive of the social categories of gender, individualization may re-embed 'women' in new socialities. Thus individualization may not be emptying out gender but creating new lines of gender demarcation and domination, for instance those of community, of networks, ties and bonds, of new knowledges and forms of communication (ibid, p.136).

Like Lash, Adkins avers that individualization and reflexive production can lead to more, rather than less, 'tradition', but suggests that it appears in the undesirable form of reconstituted relations of family appropriation that lead to the reaffirmation of conventional gender fates. But outside of tourist work, how pervasive is this? In the following section, by utilizing our own data and drawing on other critics, we provide some much-needed confirmation of Adkins's theory by showing how women are employed in 'family relations of appropriation' in other cultural work contexts - specifically in highly utopianized 'new media' production.

Back to Nature? Retraditionalization in the New Media Sector

In the new media sector - the very essence, it is widely argued, of reflexive and emancipated cultural production - we can find evidence to corroborate the notion that cultural workplaces are increasingly dependent on the retraditionalized 'incitement of family relations of appropriation' (Adkins, 1999, p.132). To give an illustrative example, amongst the workers we have interviewed [3] was 'Louise', the sole female amongst 10 employees of 'Emergence', a small, Manchester UK-based new media and marketing company. Officially, Louise was responsible solely for client management and 'interfacing' - meeting and liaising with clients and investors, communicating their needs to the creatives and programmers on the production floor. However, her duties were expected to extend into other, non-specific and unofficial roles, ones seemingly prescribed by her gender. For example, Louise was often required to provide nurturing, emotional support for disgruntled and marginalised team members, exclusively younger men, many new to the industry and struggling to adapt to the rigours of this most reflexivized of workplaces. In fact, she would routinely act as an intermediary between the creative 'guys' on the floor, and management - not in any official capacity as, say, union

representative or team manager – but, it transpired, as an unofficial 'mother' figure to the 'guys' or, when required, as the 'soft' face of management diktat. Such roles were entirely exterior to her job description. The operations manager was happy to have Louise 'manage him', as he somewhat patronizingly described, (a further unofficial extension of her role), yet her status and financial rewards were scant compared to other employees. 'Emergence' made no bones about the need to employ men in the key managerial, technical and creative roles – for only they were perceived to have the skills, 'flexibility' and lack of familial responsibilities necessary to fit into the required long hours work pattern. Additionally, and despite the dexterity and diplomacy with which Louise was able to juggle her multiple roles, it was explained by one manager that women were generally underemployed by 'Emergence' because they lacked the necessary flexibility to 'fit into the culture'.

Louise's experiences were by no means extraordinary. Our research often uncovered ways in which women were expected, by their male colleagues, to adopt traditionalized female roles – either directly in the context of their employment in administrative or 'support' occupations, or indirectly. Even those women who *were* employed in creative and technical occupations (i.e. non-traditional roles), found that it was repeatedly *assumed* by male managers that they were more capable of, and indeed should take on, more traditional 'family' roles in the firm when the need arose. Male managers would seek to use women to diffuse tense situations with clients by employing, as one manager described, their 'bright, sparkling and chirpy voices'. Indeed, these perceived 'naturally feminine' traits (as another manager described) often overshadowed other more creative and technical skills that the women possessed. Thus when male managers of businesses with few or no women were questioned about why women were noticeably absent from creative and technical roles and whether strategies to recruit more women had been employed, there was a recurring discourse regarding the sort of positive contribution that professional women could bring to an organisation, one which centred on ways in which women could potentially 'balance' an organisation because of their 'softness', 'sensitivity' and their reputed 'use of different sides of the brain' – the following account is typical:

> *I think it would be nice to have a lot more girls around because I think it gives a different*
>
> *atmosphere to the company and things like that (...) And certainly for the sales side I would*

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almost definitely want a girl to do the ringing up or somebody that sounds youthful. (Male manager of internet marketing/advertising company).

In this instance the possibility that a woman might be employed to 'balance out' or contribute to the *creative* or *technical* production aspects of the company is not even considered – and this omission was widespread. By and large women were only seen as being able to counterbalance male innovation and creativity by taking on 'supporting' roles that befitted their 'natural' gender attributes. It was repeatedly denied by male managers that women possessed legitimate expertise in creative or technological production (see Nixon, 2003 for similar findings in his study of London's advertising industry).

The experience of Louise and other female respondents would be recognized by Adkins as indicative of how women tend to be subordinated in 'communities' of reflexive production; an example of how while 'women may be key in the constitution of community (…) they may not be able to claim membership or belonging in terms of that community in the same ways as men' (1999, p.128). Indeed, women in UK new media continue to be wholly underrepresented in managerial, creative and content producing occupations, as recent data from Skillset (2005) has indicated [4].

Further, in the new media sector, we can also find evidence to corroborate Adkins observations regarding the ways in which family relations of appropriation at *home* can inhibit participation in cultural work. Gill (2002), in her study of independent and freelance new media workers in six European countries, further confirms Adkins's theory by suggesting that firms' desire for total 'flexibility', when combined with domestic or family pressures, can force women away from reflexivized roles. For employers, flexibility means that workers must preference only business priorities and duly contort themselves to meet the prevailing demands of any given project; it less often means that workers exert some control over when and where they choose to execute their roles. For example, the need for 'after hours' or through the night working (often at short notice and unpaid) is commonplace amongst the most dynamic new media firms and projects. Conversely, in quiet periods, firms may choose to lay off staff or cut hours, and freelancers may, regardless, find

themselves without work for long periods, with such unpredictability serving to intensify the stress of working in this most capricious and 'stop-go' of sectors (Gill, 2002; Pratt, 2000). For women, customarily charged with a fuller complement of domestic and familial responsibilities, ones that often require routine and stability, such demands are difficult to live with and may well inhibit their ability (and indeed desire) to fulfil reflexive roles. Perrons (2003) provides some corroboration of Gill's work in her study of new media careers in Brighton, UK. While providing some evidence that flexible new media work can indeed provide women (and men) with the levels of self-fulfilment, autonomy and personal rewards so often claimed for them, she nonetheless uncovers the persistence of traditional gender inequalities in terms of pay, access to resources and ability to exploit networked social structures, and stresses the particular difficulties endured by women required to juggle commitments to work and non-work activity, as she concludes here:

> …although ICT permits greater flexibility in working hours and locations which potentially allows those with caring responsibilities access to paid work, an important starting point for redressing gender inequalities, the traditional constraint of time arising from the uneven division of domestic work and caring remains (Perrons, 2003, p.89).

In Perrons' (as in Gill's) study, informal networks emerged as the principal source of information about work opportunities. However, as Stoloff *et al* (1999) discuss, there is now substantive evidence of the problems endured by women who wish to benefit from close knit, informal, 'out of hours' social and economic relations, not least of which is the ongoing requirement to fulfil certain domestic responsibilities and the specific difficulties of securing childcare to enable participation. Gill fails to mention the problems of obtaining adequate childcare only because so very few of her twenty- and thirty-something respondents (and none of the women) actually had any children. As she somewhat ruefully observes, echoing the findings of many others:

> ….it would be extremely difficult for a woman to combine child-rearing with the bulimic patterns of a portfolio new media career – without an excellent support

network of childcarers willing to mimic the intense stop-go work patterns and long

hours, or a radical restructuring of heterosexual gender relations (2002, p.84).

Given this difficulty, it is no surprise that many women defer parenthood or find it an intense

struggle to combine both parenting and paid work in this most demanding sector.

In our own research we have also been able to demonstrate how women's domestic labour

overshadows the possibility of full participation in reflexive new media work. The 'flexibility'

demanded by firms has made the sector particularly challenging for women with dependents – the

hours are prohibitive and working from home was often frowned upon or not conducive to sustaining

the 'tightly knit teams' that the sector produces and so reveres. Yet, by managers, only the *virtues* of

flexible working are routinely promoted, as for example when this respondent proudly explained how

he had developed a contract that:

> *….excludes the people from the European directive on the maximum working week so people*
>
> *can work as many hours as they feel they have to. For some people it's horrific some weeks, the*
>
> *doctors in A&E have a good time compared to us!* (Male manager – web design company)

'Flexibility' for the owners and managers of new media companies is essentially interpreted as the

ability to call on employees to be available for work whenever required – including late into the night

or at weekends. Amongst the women we interviewed, living up to the flexible ideal proved difficult,

and often impossible:

> *That is possibly the one bad side there. It does take over your life. So it's hard to see my*
>
> *family and friends….Yeah. They are very hard to see. I do work SO many hours that it is*
>
> *really hard to fit* [family and friends] *in. So if they don't work with me in some way, they*
>
> *get offended and you know, you always try and make time for family, but again that's quite*
>
> *hard and you have to make priorities… I would not really want to do this when I was 40.*
>
> *You know, work 90 hours-weeks and not see your family and things* [laughs]. *But I can*

do it now, so that's okay. It just does become your life, but - that's okay for now (Female

web designer).

Being flexible was not only problematic in the workplace, but when also being required to demonstrate 'commitment' beyond the formal time and spaces of work. When asked whether she felt a central part of (Manchester's) new media social network or 'community', predominantly a night-time drinking, pub and club-led scene, one female multimedia designer with dependents replied:

I'd say I'm on the periphery of it... I am not [central] *because....I think it is because of having children basically.*

As McRobbie (2002) has elsewhere noted, the prevalent 'club culture sociality' of new media is largely incompatible with any dutiful fulfilment of domestic and family responsibilities. In this respect, the structures of cultural work employment are not conducive to the full participation of women.

Positive Retraditionalization?

Can women enjoy reflexive occupations in cultural work? As we discussed, Beck has argued that women have now been substantially unleashed from their feudal chains, and so - backed by widespread incitements to become more active and entrepreneurial in the workplace – it is at least possible that they can enter occupations historically denied to them, and develop themselves as more creative, autonomous and reflexive workers. Thus, while we broadly endorse the work of Adkins and others, we want to recover some of Lash's earlier optimism and suggest that individualization is both dynamic and double-edged, and under conditions of 'detraditionalization' and 'the necessity of choice' (Beck, 1992) it is entirely possible that new workplace identities will be generated as old ones are challenged and compromised (Banks, 2007).

In our research, both men and women often spoke about the pleasure they gained from working in small, independent new media organisations. Many women felt that these types of organisations were central in the quest to create reflexive and autonomous careers. Many women valued working in

small, close knit teams where a sense of trust and camaraderie were highly prized. Women often commented on the rewards of artistic integrity and independence they had achieved. For women, as for men, the aesthetics and the work and social spaces of the sector were prized (the city centre, converted warehouses with their design conscious, open plan offices) as too were the relaxed dress codes which set new media workers apart from the 'world of suits' (as one put it) (see also Nixon, 2003; Ross, 2003). To use a theatrical metaphor, both the stage and the costumes, were seen as important in playing out new media worker roles.

Thus, in spite of being subjected to numerous, sometimes subtle forms of discrimination, we also identified a number of women who were able to develop creative, innovative and flexible careers and who felt passionate and privileged about their jobs – as one female multimedia designer put it:

> *I thought somebody could pay you to do this. You know like, you could actually find a job and get paid to do this! And totally enjoy it. And I could not actually believe that. It was really like 'wow'!*

Another woman, a journalist/writer on web issues, spoke enthusiastically about the opportunities available:

> *Yeah, it's a lifestyle choice. I was 15 in 1988 and I went to all the warehouse raves and free party raves and you know, ecstasy, all that stuff. It's a certain culture that's evolved around that and I had worked in office jobs and I did not like it. You know, I don't like wearing suits, working to set hours, don't like office politics in normal kind of 9-5 jobs. And even though I work really hard, its work I enjoy with people that I enjoy working with.*

Many of the women we interviewed felt that they were part of a strong community of like-minded people with whom they could work with collaboratively and share contacts and resources:

You very quickly learn which people have got your back up and which people are only there when you do something, you know, that's 'cool'. So I had pretty much sussed out creatively which people in Manchester I liked and trusted. So whenever opportunities came up, like when I was doing the website, there were automatically certain people that I would go to see if they would like to get involved. And they always do really. Which makes it really, really fun then because it's like people that you respect that you are working with. And you know, they respect you.

(Female creative entrepreneur)

It seems clear that women can place as much value as men on the fact that they are not working in the corporate, mainstream world and enjoy the fruits of 'club culture sociality'. Others, reflected on the autonomous possibilities opened up by being self-employed, as in the case of this designer and web entrepreneur:

Freelancing…well I've been warned it is the most stressful area of work to go into you're constantly wondering, in the back of your mind, what's happening next week…which means you've constantly got to say yes to work…so you have to organise, that's where the discipline comes in, not taking too much on [just] talking enough on, because I don't need to rip my hair out about things anymore. I'm not in a hurry. I enjoy earning money and the beauty about this job is you can - to a degree. You can earn a decent amount of money in a nice relaxed [way].

But of course the question remains - are women simply fooling themselves here? Not only are those managers, firms and contractors higher up the chain of production strongly in control of the day-to-day application of flexible working, but as Ursell (2000) notes, while in reflexive cultural work there is some evidence of 'self rule' in freelance or independent production contexts, this can lead to reductive forms of self-exploitation as the accumulation imperatives of firms are given priority. Women we interviewed were often aware of the double-edged sword of working in creative firms – the possibility of enhanced creative freedom but also greater (self) exploitation (McRobbie, 2002). So while strong feelings of autonomy were espoused, it is possible that workers may have (in part) been

making a virtue out of a necessity as a strategy for coping with some the more nefarious impositions of reflexive production.

Nonetheless, the ambivalence of individualization is that it throws up opportunities as well as threats (Smart, 1999). Therefore retraditionalization, that rekindling of 'pre-modern' relations of reciprocity, trust, sociability and communitarian sentiment, can, on occasion, lead (as Lash suggests) to new forms of the 'we', as women become part of reflexive firms and communities characterized by more rewarding and autonomized social relations. And while we must accept Adkins argument that tradition is often instrumentally utilized and marked by (gendered) power relations – we should not lose sight of the fact that it can also provoke desires for self-realization and underwrite community-building initiatives that benefit women, so providing examples of how more progressive forms of 'retraditionalization' are achievable.

Conclusions

This paper has provided a critique of the individualization thesis, with its emphasis on the capacity of change to undo historical configurations, by emphasizing the renewal of tradition under reflexively modern conditions. Drawing on Lash, we have shown how tradition is not simply dismantled by the forces of modernization, but actively created as organizations and actors seek to develop new forms of embedded social bond, particularly necessary for meeting the demands now imposed by post-industrial, reflexive production. The retraditionalization of work is viewed by Lash as at least offering some potential to re-establish more social and personally-rewarding work relations.

Yet, developing on Adkins's work in tourism, we have evidenced in the new media industry how the construction of tradition may involve the resuscitation of some less than desirable 'traditional' work relations. Those 'embedded', 'pre-modern' structures that have re-emerged to provide maps and anchors for actors compelled to navigate the choppy waters of individualisation, have been shown to incite traditional forms of discrimination and reinforce conservative prescriptions regarding the role of men and women in reflexive 'community' contexts. The renewal of family relations of appropriation, and other forms of retraditionalizing structure, when coupled with the cultural

economy's disavowal of those late-Fordist institutional structures that were devised to protect against forms of gender discrimination, has ensured that it is men who are now largely provided with the maximum opportunity to take advantage of reflexive occupations and workplaces.

Despite this, some positive evidence of how reflexive production can benefit women was provided with some women we have interviewed describing the reflexive and creative aspects of their work in similar ways to men. A decisive aspect of contemporary individualization is that, outside of the 'old bonds', individuals must *assert* themselves in order to obtain the working lives they crave. The 'necessity of choice' and the compulsion to make ones own life in a more fluid, open-ended and indeterminate institutional landscape has become a decisive characteristic of the current modern phase (Beck, 1992; Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994). The rise of an 'entrepreneurial' workplace subject (du Gay, 1996), one driven by the desire for self-application, unleashes the potential for women to (at least partially) make their own lives, including their lives at work. While, evidently, firms continue to strongly 'govern' workers, and seek to reinforce the 'intimate connection between subjectification and subjection' (Ursell, 2000, p.821; see also du Gay, 1996; Rose, 1999), we should not too easily discount the ways in which some of the women we encountered appeared to derive genuine senses of personal autonomy, creative fulfilment and social rewards from pursuing their dream career. We recommend that the socially progressive potentials of this 'entrance' of women into reflexive work need to be further explored.

Overall, however, Adkins' evidence for retraditionalization does bring into question conventional assumptions regarding the capacity of individualization to undo traditional social roles and identities and so engender 'freedom'. Such evidence further confirms Taylor's conviction that contemporary workplace studies should not disregard traditional sociological categories in terms of analysis, in particular regarding increasingly culturalized work and its 'distinctly gendered nature' (2002, p.8). Particularly in the case of new media and other cultural industries, perhaps the time is ripe for further reassessment of how far 'new' forms of work rely on 'old' patterns of discrimination and exploitation. This is possible without overlooking the very real progress made by strongly motivated

and reflexive women producers who have been able to take at least some advantage of the ambivalent qualities of cultural workplace transformation.

Notes

[1] Cultural work is defined for our purposes here as creative, technical or design-based work in small to medium sized enterprises (SMEs) of the cultural/creative industries. The creative cultural worker (aka the 'artist', the 'designer', the 'director', the 'writer', the 'musician') is very much at the centre of the cultural industry labour process; it is they who are *primarily* responsible for the production of those symbolic commodities judged to be essential components of the transition to a 'post-industrial', 'creative' or 'knowledge' based economy (e.g. see Lash and Urry, 1994).

[2] Here 'new media' is taken to include website design, computer games design, digital art production and internet-based advertising, promotion and marketing services – generally any activities focussed on the production of Internet-based applications, computer software and other electronically distributed or 'digital' goods. We recognise this is by no means a comprehensive definition of a sector that is proving notoriously difficult to pigeonhole given the speed and diversity of its internal transformation, and the ways in which elements of 'new' media have now become part and parcel of virtually all industrial sectors. Notwithstanding the problems of definition, the bundle of activities that are routinely identified as 'new media' are now acknowledged as crucial to economic growth; the UK Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) estimated in 2005 that employment in 'software, computer games and electronic publishing' had grown by an average 10% per annum over the period 1995-2004, with the contribution of the sector to national Gross Value Added (GVA) rising from 1.8 to 2.8% over the same period. This makes it by far the largest of the designated 'creative industry' sectors championed by the DCMS.

[3] The evidence we present from our own research is taken from three projects – firstly, SMILE (Skills for the Missing Industry's Leaders and Enterprises) a project part-sponsored by the European Social Fund (ESF) which analysed workplace identities in new media firms in the North-West of England. Interviews and case study research was undertaken with 20 small and medium-sized (SME)

new media companies. Secondly, CIREN, part-sponsored by the ESF which involved interviews with women employees and freelancers in Manchester's new media and music community (only data relating to new media companies has been used for the purposes of this paper). Finally data has been drawn upon from the Emerging Sector Opportunities project (part funded by the ESF and directed by Julia Owen, Department of Sociology, Manchester Metropolitan University) – the project examined the extent to which such factors as recruitment and retention strategies, new patterns of working, contracts of employment and organisational 'cultures and behaviours' within new media businesses directly or indirectly discriminated against certain groups. This research included 20 interviews with owner-managers of new media SMEs in the North-West of England. In each of the three projects the primary data were generated through in-depth qualitative interviews with managers and under-workers in firms, as well as through interviews with freelancers working in the sector. During interviews it was usually the case that we were able to interview more than one manager or worker in each company – this enabled us to compare, contrast and 'cross-check' competing accounts, as we were aware of the danger of obtaining only a singular view of an organization. We should add that the experiences of this sample are not necessarily generalizable across other cultural or creative industry sectors nor representative of the new media sector as a whole, and would likely contrast with workers in larger, more 'corporatized' new media enterprises, as well as those workers involved in new media work in more traditional (non-cultural/creative) sectors. We do suggest however that our findings may be at least indicative of some broader trends emerging in both new media and other forms of cultural work – as our paper has argued.

[4] Skillset (2005) research found the percentage employment of women in new media sub sectors varying from processing labs (7%), electronic games (8%) up to facilities (22%), post production (26%) and offline multimedia (26%).

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