

A critical political economy of bohemian subjectification: internationalised education for transcultural labour

Rupert Waldron

London College of Fashion, University of the Arts London, United Kingdom

r.waldron@fashion.arts.ac.uk

Abstract

In the new corporatising university, internationalised art and design higher education (A&D HE) is particularly vulnerable to reduction to instrumentalised economic value production. Political and consumer relations between public institution and international student are uncoupled as compared to earlier nation-centric models, freeing the economic for unhindered exploitation behind ‘global citizenship’ smokescreens. Further, the new spirit of neoliberal capitalism incorporates the copyright-ready creativity of bohemian subjectification as organised productive force. Exploring this instrumentalism and its alternatives, this paper draws on qualitative interviews with alumnae of London A&D HE active in the field of fashion in Mumbai, engaged in the creative labour of transcultural intermediation. This concept draws from Bourdieuan frameworks their underexplored origins in the anthropology of cross-cultural encounter to describe transcultural communications between manufacture and consumption.

The paper considers the development and exploitation of human capital in the era of networked communications and their extension of industrial production into the soul, its yearnings and imaginative self-constitution. It analyses the political economy of that productive force in its educational development and professional application through and for the globalised value chains of fashion’s geographies, along with alternatives. The transcultural intermediation whereby a Mumbai stylist proposes a match for a global fashion brand in the city’s wardrobe, for instance, connecting garment and niche, draws the imaginatively migrant labour of bohemian subjectivity into communicational post-Fordist logistics. These logistics micro-organise transnational supply chains under increasing competition for market domination – here through orchestration of individuation as qualitative socialised production. But this same living productivity also organises alternatives, drawing from the same cosmopolitan subjectification and transnational network-building creative means of collectivisation.

This paper also draws on Marxist frameworks responsive to cultural industry to argue that defending a sustainable, non-exploitative, equality-oriented internationalised A&D HE in the fashion context depends on a counter-logistics for cultural industry. This would disrupt the capture of fetishized creativity into the integrating projects of capital by aligning instead with the collective subject of all labour as both creative and, within world-scale markets, transcultural. In the concrete terms of the research project discussed, that means developing transnational inter-institutional partnerships towards labour interests across the fashion field, considering manufacturing, retail and distribution together within an inclusive and heterogeneously material notion of communications. Market-disciplined HEIs' temptation is to reduce cosmopolitan creativity to precarity-ready attributes for flexible integration. Though only the earliest steps of this venture are outlined here, it seeks collectively oriented creativity for alternative transnationalism.

Keywords: transcultural communications; internationalisation; cultural economy

ISBN: 978-989-54263-0-0