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Expat agencies: expatriation and exploitation in the creative industries in the UK and the Netherlands

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Abstract

This chapter explores so-called ‘expat agencies’ in the graphic design, branding and advertising sector in the Netherlands, the young British ‘flexpatriates’ and self-initiated expatriates who staff them, and the different pathways into creative labour their expatriation represents. Hybrid local–global spaces are marked by the mobility of people and management practices, which give rise to contradictions when capitalist relations of production are mediated at different local and global registers. Thirty-three interviews were conducted with expatriates working in the field and other creatives employed at, or with experience of, the workplace and sectoral dynamics underpinning the constellation of expat agencies based in Amsterdam and the wider Randstad area consisting of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht. The chapter considers the role of individual expatriates and the expat agencies around which they congregate in conditioning their pathways into and between creative jobs.

Keywords: Expatriation – Creative Labour – Graphic Design – Branding – Advertising

Introduction

This chapter explores so-called ‘expat agencies’ in the graphic design, branding and advertising sector in the Netherlands, the young British ‘flexpatriates’ and self-initiated expatriates who staff them, and the different pathways into creative labour their expatriation represents. It considers the experiences of expatriates working in the field and other creatives employed at, or with experience of, the workplace and sectoral dynamics underpinning the constellation of expat agencies based in Amsterdam and the wider Randstad area consisting of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht. The chapter considers how individual expatriates and the expat agencies around which they congregate negotiate hybrid local–global spaces marked by the mobility of people and management practices, and the contradictions that arise when capitalist relations of production are mediated at different local and global registers.

The chapter reports findings from a study of junior, middleweight and senior designers, strategists and creative directors working at, or having recently worked at, agencies specialising in graphic design, brand design and strategic design in the Randstad area. Focusing on the career paths and narratives of this cohort of workers. Along with embedded ethnographic fieldwork, 33 semi-structured, hour-long interviews focusing on participants’ career paths and narratives were conducted in workplace and social settings over the course of two years in order to understand the organisation, practice and experience of the creative labour process in the design, branding and advertising sector in the UK and the Netherlands. To ensure confidentiality, the

participants are referred to with descriptive but distinctive job titles. The specific case study at the centre of this chapter describes how, to compensate for the typical four-day week worked by Dutch nationals, design, advertising and branding agencies based in and around Amsterdam and the Randstad area recruit young British expatriate creatives, largely from London. Leaving family behind ties and friendship networks, these young creatives bring with them an expectation of long, intense work schedules developed in a national context quite different from the family-oriented work schedules of Dutch designers, who build work around life rather than the reverse. The British creative workers view expatriate situations as a viable pathway to progress in the creative industries; expatriate work is presented to them as a hub for the realisation of creative lifestyles without the deleterious intensity associated with creative professions in London and other urban centres.

However, the case study finds that even in a societal context where it is not the norm, they encountered an extension of the culture of long working hours from which they had escaped. Nationally, the agencies in the case study are subject to the specific working cultures in which they are located, but in the case of Dutch and British agencies, flows of individual labour from the latter to the former subtly restructure expectations around work intensity and extent. These expat agencies import a young UK labour force from London agencies. These young creatives bring with them an expectation of long working hours and intense work regimes, which they take for granted as a part of creative work pathways. In turn, these patterns and practices of work then take root in the Amsterdam agencies. The young expatriate creatives in the study associated the latter with a more laid-back ethos. Whilst their expatriation was not always actively in search of a new working lifestyle, it was an expectation that a more positive work–life balance would be available in Amsterdam and elsewhere in the Netherlands. Instead, the patterns and practices of work to which they were accustomed in London gradually came to take hold in the Netherlands and replace what was seen as the traditional Dutch way of working. Seeking out something new, participants in the study reported young creatives confronting only the reproduction, in another setting, of the very same conditions from which they sought or envisaged an escape.

Despite differences between how work and working hours are managed in the two national contexts of the UK and the Netherlands, the contention of this chapter is that a hybridity is achieved in the movement and exploitation of young expatriates. The creative industries in each destination can be seen to converge in such a way as to establish common modes of organising how effort is extracted and the time in which it occurs. There is a tendency to associate expatriation with high-powered, well-paid executives. This chapter, however, reveals a darker side by reinstating a conceptualisation of expatriation as a form of labour – and flexpatriation and self-initiated expatriation as specifically precarious and potentially exploitative forms of labour, typical of pressures faced by creative labour across the board (Gill and Pratt, 2008; Ross, 2008; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2008). There are imperatives on firms and their branches to conform to dominant ways of doing business and organising workplace life.

The chapter proceeds as follows. First, a brief survey of the literature on expatriation is given, with a specific focus on flexpatriation and self-initiated expatriation of the kind covered in the case study, including the institutionalist frameworks of convergence and divergence between different local and global contexts through which

it has been understood. Identifying some issues with the latter, the chapter proposes a focus on expatriation as a form of labour and on the diverse pathways with implied local–global differences in governance and workplace regimes that are ostensibly open to expatriates. The main part of the chapter refers to the case study to consider the social relations of production and their national and global mediation in the specific context of expat agencies in the Netherlands and the role of young British creatives within them. It is concluded that, in line with ‘labour geography’ (Herod, 1997; Selwyn, 2011) approaches to the role of workers in the construction of local–global hybridity, it is necessary to focus on expatriates as occupying a sometimes-contradictory status. They are both a labour force subject to exploitation on the basis of their mobility and, in this case, youth; and workers capable of wielding their own agency to move and create pathways for the realisation of their careers and, in this case, creative vocation. Such an approach reconfigures how we see not only expatriation but also creative labour and creative industries in a global context.

(FI)expatriation and self-initiated expatriation

Expatriates are ‘employees who are on a long-term assignment outside their home country’ (Mayerhofer et al., 2004, p. 1372). They are ‘deployed to disseminate corporate strategy and culture to local units and to transfer competence across borders’ (Brewster and Scullion, 2007, p. 33). Indeed, ‘[e]xpatriation is an integral part of TNCs’ [transnational corporations]’ attempts to develop the global organisation of the firm in terms of corporate strategy, command and control systems, and the sharing of best practice, learning and knowledge’ (Edström and Galbraith, 1977). The existing research suggests that this constructs a continuity between expatriates wherever they are in an increasingly interconnected world (Beaverstock, 2004). In Boussebaa et al.’s (2012) case study on consultants, expatriates ‘did not point to significant organizational differences between themselves and central headquarters ... they viewed themselves as existing in a globalized world in which the management and organization of work no longer had a nationality’ (p. 480). Boussebaa et al. recommend that the same frame of analysis used to view the relationship of expatriate consultants within a globalising firm structure could be adopted to analyse other professional service firms, such as advertising agencies.

The vocational and status diversity of the expatriate population has not always been fully captured by the dominant strands in the literature on the topic (Kofman and Rhaguram, 2006; Zheng and Smith, 2018). Whereas at the top of firms we find an ‘international cadre of executives ... capable of thinking global, acting local, and vice versa’, and who represent the ‘premium capital’ on which organisations draw in ‘transferring the enterprise’s commercial and operational philosophies and systems into every location in which they wish to do business’ (Perkins, 1997, pp. 62–63), other experiences of expatriation are not quite so glamorous. Al-Ariss (2010) highlights how expatriates are also expatriate *workers* who labour in a given time and space under certain conditions at the corporate as well as the national level, as highlighted in the different legal provisions for posted workers (Wagner, 2015). Jeanes et al. (2015) point to the blurred line that exists between expatriates and migrant workers away from the ‘international cadre of executives’ described by Perkins (1997). Moreover, it is stressed elsewhere that expatriation is not only a top–down process imposed by companies from

above, but a bottom–up process driven and experienced by expatriate workers themselves (Collings et al., 2007).

Approaches that take this more granular perspective highlight some of the difficulties and negative outcomes endured by expatriates as a means for disseminating best practice and globalising firms from the ground up. What is highlighted is the potential cost to expatriates of this device through which firms expand their global reach or export best practice. Whilst expatriates can be a vector of organisational transformation, possibly as a strategy towards the global firm, Collings et al. (2007) note a failure to develop human resource management (HRM) policies to ‘ensur[e] congruence between employees’ work behaviours and the organisational strategy’ (p. 202). The difficulty in ensuring such a strategy at the HRM level is that there has been an increasing diversification of expatriate assignments away from traditional long-term stays away towards what Mayerhofer et al. (2004) call ‘flexpatriation’. Collings et al. (2007) identify short-term assignments, commuter assignments, international business travel and virtual assignments as particular guises assumed by flexpatriation. We also see a rise in ‘self-initiated expatriation’, in which expatriates go of their own accord, whether with a firm or without. And, because it costs the firm less to fill places with self-initiated expatriates than formal expatriates, the workers experience less support (Collings et al., 2007, p. 204).

These disjunctures lead to tensions and conflicts around expatriation. Morgan (2001) describes these expatriates deployed in the development of ‘global firms’ as subject to their function in transnational corporations’ transportation of ‘learning across different sites’ (p. 120), for example, through their participation in ‘the application of best practice standards from one plant to another’ (p. 120). Within this there will be tensions and conflicts, particularly in ‘the “national” adaptation’ of ‘expatriates [...] assimilated in foreign postings’ (p. 121). More prosaically, the literature evidences many unintended consequences of expatriation that impact negatively upon individual expatriates. Firstly, Mayerhofer et al.’s (2004) findings suggest that ‘some organisations considered that [expatriate] assignments might be suitable only for employees who were single or of a particular age group’ (pp. 1376–1377). Collings et al. (2007) point out that without families, expatriates may ‘work excessive hours and fail to manage their work–life balance which can lead to stress, burn-out and poor performance’ (p. 209), although they note the need for further study in this area. Furthermore, as small and medium enterprises increasingly participate in internationalisation and joint ventures, they rapidly expand the demand for expatriate employees (p. 202). However, unlike larger firms, ‘[s]maller organisations use flexpatriate assignments as a matter of necessity, within narrow time and cost constraints, often putting great pressure on their staff’ (Mayerhofer et al., 2004, p. 1375). Mayerhofer et al. conclude that good international HRM policies are needed to smooth these impacts.

Whether or not such policies are introduced to successfully smooth the impacts, many scholars point towards the possibility opened up by means of global staffing and expatriation for the creation of the global ‘one-firm’ model, comprising transnational communities divided no longer by national institutional differences. We might think here of Meyer’s (1997) understanding of ‘world society’, by which the global impacts upon the local and constitutes a kind of ‘stateless governance’ irrespective of national divides (Boussebaa, 2017). It is expatriates who make possible the hybridisation typical of what Morgan (2001) calls ‘transnational spaces’ with their ‘transnational communities’. These

communities 'emerge within global firms, among either managers or employees, as shared interests are developed within the transnational social space' (Morgan, 2001, p. 121). In this sense 'transnational' differs from 'international' insofar as the latter still implies powerful jurisdiction of national differences. From this perspective, transnational spaces are 'more than simply the sum of interactions between different "national" units' (Morgan, 2001, p. 121). Rather, they constitute a 'social space' in themselves. These are produced from the interplay between bottom-up processes of migration and mobility and top-down processes of internationalisation.

As Smith and Meiskins (1995) and Smith (2008) have pointed out, institutionalist approaches to business systems and the construction of transnational spaces can sometimes cloak the continuing realities of exploitation and class conflict that characterise capitalist production at its core. Approaches fixated on how actors navigate reified 'varieties' of capitalism thus miss the hybridity of how these social relations are mediated through different societal or corporate forms, and the contradictions that take hold at different firm, sector and national levels (see Harvey et al., 2019). It is not always a case of identifying convergence and divergence, but frequently something more fraught between the two (Smith, 2008).

From this perspective, a useful prism through which to view the relationship between expatriation and the attempts by professional services firms to attain the status or character of 'global firms' (Boussebaa et al., 2012) might be the 'labour geographies' perspective outlined by Andrew Herod (1997) and Ben Selwyn (2011), among others. The labour geographies approach 'opens up analytical space for the agency of workers ... to shape the geographies of capitalism' (p. 284), with consequences both intentional and unintentional. Rather than being 'passive victims', by exerting an effect on working conditions, workers change the institutional profile of a region or national context. Labour thus plays a 'co-constitutive role in the capitalist development process' at a local level (Selwyn, 2011, p. 207), producing tendencies towards convergence, whilst itself being conditioned by both global and local processes. Rather than producing the smooth contour-free surface of the 'global firm', it might be said that this dialectical dynamic produces an uneven field of local-global hybridity marked by contradiction, tension and conflict – even where this is concealed within the posited identification of interests around artistic or creative vocation, as is often the case in creative fields such as those under scrutiny in the case study.

Expatriation agencies in Amsterdam: a case study

Amsterdam creative studios were known by some participants in the studies as 'expatriation agencies' (Strategist, June 2014) because they rely on a young international workforce that has no established social or family networks, is well accustomed to the intense working schedules of cities such as London and is ready to be totally immersed in work. Because Dutch creatives prioritise work-life balance and family time, young foreign creatives offer agencies the possibility to extend and intensify work patterns. As one interviewee explained, 'there's a lot of internationals in our studio who are brought over to fill the senior gaps because the senior Dutch people don't want to work five days a week' (Creative Director, March 2014). Dutch employees 'want four days or they want to leave on time.' Hence, the companies 'employ internationals because they're willing to work the longer hours, because their mentality and cultural references are very different to the

references here.’ For the internationals, the interviewee suggests, ‘working hard is a positive’. But for Dutch nationals it is ‘I’m disrupted from my family life, so I’m not doing that’.

In their move from one country to the other in search of creative careers, young designers and brand strategists take advantage of the close connection between, and high concentration of, creative industries in the UK and the Netherlands. Each have a similar concentration of creative industry employment relative to their size – around 7.5% (Nathan et al., 2015). But there are clearly national differences in working styles, and specifically working hours, between the UK and the Netherlands that would be expected to carry through in the organisation of labour at the firm level. There are marked differences in the average number of weekly hours worked in one’s main job in each country. At the time of the research the average working week in the UK was consistently almost a whole day longer than that found in the Netherlands (Eurostat, 2019). This also plays out at the extremes. In 2014, whereas in the Netherlands only one per cent of workers work more than 50 hours a week, some 18 per cent of workers in the UK worked 50 hours or more (OECD 2014). The different outcomes of these working-time regimes are indicated in the divergent patterns of productivity in each country (OECD 2019); GDP per hour is far higher in comparatively low-hours Holland than in long-hours UK. This suggests cultural differences in norms around how labour is managed, regulated and organised. Moreover, average weekly working hours in London are longer than in the rest of the UK, and those in Amsterdam are relatively similar to the national average (Eurostat, 2019).

These statistical differences were reflected, for the most part, in the experiences of participants in the study. The general impression presented by participants who had worked at both UK and Dutch agencies was that the latter were more organised and thus more relaxed and with far less variance in the extent of working hours over any given period of time (Designer, February 2014; Senior Designer, March 2014). In principle this guaranteed a better work–life balance for designers and other staff. In practice, delivering such working hours depended upon a much closer attention to, firstly, estimation of how long a job will take, and, secondly, the monitoring of working hours expended on the job via the recording and charging out of ‘billable hours’ to clients. This has implications for regimes of measurement and the need for employee compliance at points of intensity in the project cycle, such as when deadlines draw near or projects run over budget. The perceived efficiency that circumscribed the working day for designers employed at some Amsterdam agencies chimed with a prevailing corporate culture that preserved a traditional approach to work times unfamiliar to those used to the cut-and-thrust of UK industry. For instance, one participant gave the example of a Dutch heritage brand where the shutters come down at 5.30pm every evening, and there is a compulsory hour’s lunch break at one o’clock (Designer, May 2014).

Although participants expressed some advantages in working for Dutch companies in terms of more relaxed and efficient work processes and shorter working hours, there is also evidence that expat agencies are conduits for convergence in working-time regimes between the two countries. Cultural expectations of the intensity and extent of the working day were translated from the UK contact by young expatriate creatives accustomed to much different management practices than Dutch nationals. This is a specific sectoral phenomenon embedded within a wider national context of

divergence; the creative industries appear to experience very similar working-time regimes in both the UK and the Netherlands even when placed in the context of wide divergences in the rest of the economy. Whilst there are statistical differences for working hours in the two countries and the two metropolitan centres under study here, things start to look somewhat different if we look at things on the ground. As such, it might be suggested that, within the patchwork of different trends and tendencies nationally, we can discern the constitution of a distinct set of characteristics shared by firms in creative industries such as design, branding and advertising.

There is an existing or emergent global or transnational character to the creative industries in the UK and the Netherlands, although the balance is not always equal between the two. Some agencies in Amsterdam endured a certain subsidiarity with reference to parent companies in London. One participant explained that, because the agency for which they worked is 'an offshoot, there's a lot of pressure for the really senior people there to deliver' against the shareholder objectives set by their superiors in London (Middleweight Designer, November 2014). But more significant still as a countervailing force to the Dutch work culture was the importing of more exhaustive hourly regimes on the backs of an international labour force sourced from the UK, which had a stronger willingness and propensity to work long hours in intense environments like those in which they once worked in London. The tendencies described here, marked by a preponderance of young British designers eager to succeed in a fresh challenge, show that expatriates offer a source of labour to fill the gaps created by the divergence of the Netherlands from the UK over a range of aspects of workplace life.

This does not confer the advantages some expatriates expect when they pick up assignments in the Netherlands, whether in the form of flexpatriation from a parent company or self-initiated expatriation on one's own account. The lack of social ties forms a vicious circle. Having no friends or family in Amsterdam induces expatriates to work longer hours. Then, because they are working long hours, they have no chance to establish new social ties. As one participant explained, 'younger graphic designers, quite a few of them single, are brought over here specifically' by the company for which he works. The interviewee suggested that 'they're being slightly abused in a way, they're being brought over and their social and family circles are really small, so they're doing crazy hours consistently and their social circle just becomes people at the workplace' (Designer, May 2014). This interviewee personally suffered from this cycle. He moved out to Amsterdam with his partner. It was the first time they had lived together, and he 'wasn't really prepared for every night to be coming home to her at half ten, eleven o'clock.' Meanwhile, more senior members of staff tended to be Dutch nationals or long-term residents.

As Middleweight Designer, who had moved from the UK to the Netherlands, noted, 'people in admin, people in higher capacity, studio management, getting people's time, etc. and the MD [Managing Director], were Dutch' and tended to seek work arrangements in tune with the norm of four-day weeks and the prioritisation of family and quality of life (Middleweight Designer, November 2014). But access to this lifestyle is seldom open to young expatriates such as those studied here. The flipside of what young British designers see as a potentially more attractive idyll is that the punishing routines of creatives from overseas support Dutch workers and managers' attractive work-life balance. In so-called expat agencies, junior creatives find themselves on the receiving

end of this inequity, reporting long hours and intense schedules. Self-fulfillingly, what one participant called the 'mental and physical exhaustion' to which expatriate designers are subject (Designer, May 2014) contributes towards the same churn of new staff that make it necessary to have a constant supply of new creative labour from the UK and elsewhere in the first place. 'Basically they exhaust creatively everyone there', the designer said of his employer. This highlights how the purportedly 'immaterial labour' associated with creative industries by some scholars (Lazzarato, 1996) consists of concrete material acts that take place in time and space with all that entails. The particular participant above had endured a specifically negative experience of the exhaustion of expatriate labour, coming to physical harm. The designer took two months off after sustaining a repetitive strain injury following a series of long days. He describes a weekend where he worked 'about ten hours on Sunday and then we were in on Monday and we did a nineteen, twenty-hour day. So we did 30 hours, or just under. And then Tuesday morning I remember just going in and it felt like my arm was hanging off.' He eventually returned to work but found that the exhausting and exploitative work culture had not changed. He left and began freelancing, striking a far better work-life balance, re-entering the same labour market ecology of which he had borne the brunt, albeit at a different and potentially more advantageous point of the cycle from that at which he had earlier jumped.

As one participant explained, whereas 'the Dutch have got it much better in terms of work-life balance, younger graphic designers [...] brought over specifically to work at agencies are being abused' (Designer, May 2014). The expat agencies recruit and exploit young, mobile foreign workers. They extract from them long hours and intense effort to compensate for the much healthier work-life balance enjoyed by Dutch nationals. The young employees' creative commitment, familiarity with long working hours, and lack of social and family ties make them ideal employees. They support the enviable creative lifestyles of older colleagues in a city where many people pride themselves on prioritising life over work.

The UK expatriate creative workforce also fills in the gaps opened by the fragmentation of the creative workforce, as designers previously employed on standard contracts break away to go freelance. Dutch agencies are therefore motivated to recruit from an outside labour force owing to profound sectoral tendencies. The Netherlands provides a particularly favourable environment for designers on formal contracts to break away and go freelance, with a generous and supportive tax and benefits system for freelancers (Strategist, February 2014). As such, bringing in UK workers responds not to a generalised shortage of creative labour, one interviewee with experience of moving from the UK to the Netherlands told me, but rather the nomadic character of the Dutch creative labour force. He explained that he thought:

... there are enough Dutch designers, but I don't think they work in agencies. They're kind of free agents. When you think of Dutch design, [...] you don't aspire to a Dutch design agency you aspire to a Dutch designer. And they're all basically freelance, artists who have found a way to make their work commercial. (Middleweight Designer, November 2014)

It was much easier to live this lifestyle in the Netherlands than in the UK, where self-employment, rather than an idyll of comparative freedom, was seen as just another form of low-paid exploitation, with little state provision to support it otherwise.

Conclusion

The agencies featured in the study were characterised by the movement of many young British designers from London to Amsterdam in search of a less intense working lifestyle. However, uprooted from the social and family networks that circumscribe the extent and intensity of the working day for many Dutch designers, they brought with them a propensity to work long and hard that they then subtly imported into the expat agencies in which they worked. However, partly by means of the intense working lifestyles imported by the young British creatives expatriated to Amsterdam, these agencies came to resemble hybrid local–global spaces in some respects unmoored from the specific and very different national contexts in which they were initially situated. In the case of Dutch and British agencies, flows of individual labour from the latter to the former subtly restructured expectations around work intensity and hours for the agencies receiving the expatriate. The study thus generates support for the existing findings of the literature on expatriation in global professional service firms, which suggests that individual expatriates help disseminate institutional logics between different branches of firms as vectors of a convergence towards the construction of global firms and clusters in the creative professional services of design, advertising and branding. However, the consequences of this for the expatriate creatives themselves provide evidence to support claims made in the literature about the weakness of international HRM practices in this area, and reveal how the increased uptake of expatriation among smaller professional services firms has specific impacts upon the individual experience of assignments.

The expat agencies covered in this chapter bear witness to some striking phenomena of work conditions. Commuting by a leisurely cycle rather than a torrid tube ride, young British creatives discovered a much different work culture in Amsterdam. But they witnessed the benefits of shorter hours and better quality of life at a distance, discovering a country where people work 30-hour weeks and nobody works the 40- or 50-hour weeks they worked in London. Here, nine-to-five structures remain intact, and rather than supporting the variable workday entailed in many contemporary creative jobs in the UK, people prioritise family and quality of life over endless drudgery. But the young found these opportunities unavailable to them, and experienced them vicariously at best. Spurred on by the intrinsic motivation of their jobs and their sense of creative identity, they worked long hours, exhausting themselves physically and mentally. Leaving London's culture of long working hours, the young expatriate creatives in the study craved the shorter working hours enjoyed by Dutch nationals, but found little change in their individual circumstances. Free of ties, used to long hours and eager to impress, expatriates are exploited in the name of a healthier work culture they cannot access. What the chapter shows is that despite the predominant focus of the expatriate literature on professionals with a managerial status, it is important to remind ourselves that many expatriates remain workers, with all that implies. Focusing on expatriates as labour – in this case, *creative* labour – brings attention to the relationships of exploitation, intensity and managerial control that persist even in the seemingly decentralised, autonomous and spontaneous working environments of the creative industries. The concept of 'creative

labour' highlights, following Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011), that the status of work in the creative industries as a kind of *labour* is still bound within the frameworks of capitalist valorisation, domination and exploitation the term implies, and is not the immanently liberated free creation both mainstream and more radical accounts would have us believe. The creative character brings into play an intrinsic vocational or artistic attachment to the work that often serves to conceal its constitution in the same set of social relations as other kinds of work. This is part of the context for the specific kind of expatriate labour we see employed and exploited by the companies surveyed in this case study.

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