



Pitts, F. H. (2022). Measuring and managing creative labour: Value struggles and billable hours in the creative industries. *Organization*, 29(6), 1081-1098. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508420968187>

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

License (if available):
CC BY

Link to published version (if available):
[10.1177/1350508420968187](https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508420968187)

[Link to publication record on the Bristol Research Portal](#)
PDF-document

This is the final published version of the article (version of record). It first appeared online via SAGE at <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508420968187>. Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

University of Bristol – Bristol Research Portal

General rights

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the reference above. Full terms of use are available: <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/red/research-policy/pure/user-guides/brp-terms/>

Measuring and managing creative labour: Value struggles and billable hours in the creative industries

Organization
2022, Vol. 29(6) 1081–1098
© The Author(s) 2020



Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/1350508420968187
journals.sagepub.com/home/org



Frederick Harry Pitts 
University of Bristol School of Management, UK

Abstract

Creative labour is often characterised as hard to measure and manage. As ‘immaterial labour’, it breaches the working day’s boundaries and produces uncertain outputs. These conditions, claim postoperaists, precipitate a ‘crisis of measurability’. Drawing on 33 interviews with workers at 10 graphic, brand and strategic design agencies in the UK and the Netherlands, this article disputes claims creative labour eludes quantification. Responding to calls to reconnect organisational research with the study of value, it deploys Marxian value theory to demonstrate that the billable hours system of pricing and allocating work in creative agencies establishes ‘fictitious norms of timing’ reminiscent of the Taylorist factory that mediate the labour-process with reference to standards of socially-necessary labour-time set in the market. Rebureaucratising and socialising creative labour, billable hours help creative agencies overcome measurability as a problem, not a crisis. But the timesheeting practices around which billable hours are organised internally are marked by antagonisms. The combination of clear measures around which to bargain and their pivotal economic role has implications for how we conceptualise the capacity of creative workers to collectively organise, make claims on value and create the potential for a realisation of the conditions of crisis postoperaists describe.

Keywords

Creative industries, creative labour, Marx, measurement, time, value

The question of measure has become an issue of ‘hot debate’ (Boehm and Land, 2009: 90). Played out in a rich stream of empirical and theoretical work (Dowling et al., 2007), this debate centres on the claim ‘today’s labour is “beyond measure” or “immeasurable”’ (Boehm and Land, 2009: 90). In approaching the issue, critical organisation scholars (Arvidsson, 2010) take a lead from postoperaists

Corresponding author:

Frederick Harry Pitts, University of Bristol School of Management, Howard House, Queens Avenue, Bristol BS8 1TN, UK.
Email: fh.pitts@bristol.ac.uk

who argue the rise of ‘immaterial labour’ (Lazzarato, 1996) based on creativity, communication and cognition sparks a ‘crisis of measurability’ simultaneous with a crisis in the law of value and the redundancy of the Marxian value theory that conceptualises it (Marazzi, 2008; Vercellone, 2010).

Within the postoperaist tradition such claims have found their widest uptake through the work of Hardt and Negri. In its most up-to-date iteration, the argument suggests ‘when confronting social production’ – in other words, the cooperative, communicative and cognitive production Hardt and Negri (2017: 164–5) see as characteristic of contemporary capitalism – ‘capital is no longer able to measure value adequately, at least not in the way it had previously’. For Hardt and Negri (2017: 143–6), productive activity is spontaneously cooperative and not organised through capitalist command or control. The unmanaged and unmanageable quality of contemporary labour, they argue, creates the conditions for a crisis in capital’s capacity to measure and value economic activity centred on knowledge and information, because ‘the wealth it creates is not (or is no longer) measurable’. This immeasurability concerns how ‘divisions of the working day are breaking down as work-time and life-time are increasingly mixed’ in an age of flexible work and hand-held technologies. The ‘capture of value tends to extend to envelop all the time of life’, exceeding money’s ability to express this expanse of productive labour (Hardt and Negri, 2017: 185).

Meanwhile, information technologies and the immaterial and affective quality of labour involving care, communication and creativity render labour ‘immediately abstract’, rather than abstract only after the fact through the exchange of its products. Hardt and Negri (2017: 173–5) relate this immediate abstraction to how previous processes of deskilling and standardisation stripped labour of its concrete specificity. Through this immediate abstraction labour attains a *directly* rather than indirectly social character, not through the market exchange of the products of private labour, but *within* the labour-process owing to the social quality of the activities performed. The socialisation of knowledge in fields like the creative industries is thus not organised inside the workplace, but spontaneously coordinated outside. Drawing from a wellspring of external knowledge and creativity, contemporary production processes are, for Hardt and Negri, unlike industrial processes and their outputs. Previous modes of capitalist accumulation valued these, ‘however imperfectly’, based on the objectification of collective know-how in formalised and standardised working practices. Meanwhile, ‘social products’ like creative services ‘resist calculation’ because they inhabit a ‘commons’ of knowledge unenclosable within the confines of private property, and beyond capital’s capacity to manage and quantify. Value production ‘no longer takes place primarily within the walls of the factory’ but ‘across the entire social terrain’, immeasurable through conventional means.

Noting the relevance of traditional forms of industrial organisation like scientific management to immaterial labour, in recent work Hardt and Negri (2017: 143) have used the concept of ‘digital Taylorism’ to explain how measure persists in spite of this underpinning crisis. Elsewhere, Marx’s concept of *socially-necessary labour-time* (SNLT) has enabled a more fundamental critique of the idea of the ‘crisis of measurability’ (Caffentzis, 2005, 2013; Pitts 2017: 199–201). Caffentzis (2013: 111) observes that ‘the process of creating propositions, objects, ideas and forms and other “immaterial products” is a process in time that can be (and is) measured’. Whilst unlike the ‘material’ factory labour of Marx’s day, it is measured nonetheless. The measurability crisis ‘does not seem to refer to what billions of people across the planet do every day under the surveillance of bosses vitally concerned about how much time the workers are at their job and how well they do it’ (Caffentzis, 2005: 97). Harvie and Milburn (2010: 633), make a similar point about claims the production of value now takes place ‘outside measure’: ‘capitalist organizations, aided by the heirs of Frederick Winslow Taylor are doing just that’. The persistence of these measures reveals not crisis but a *problem* capital confronts and overcomes.

The creative industries epitomise the conditions of the so-called ‘crisis of measurability’, enabling us to probe these competing claims theoretically and empirically. Artistic and creative

labour exemplifies immaterial labour, manipulating symbols and granting commodities meaning. Seemingly divorced in its content and setting from capitalist mediations of ‘evaluating and measuring labour’, creative labour appears ‘beyond measure’ (Boehm and Land, 2009: 76–7, 94). The crisis precipitated is ‘one of the central problematics of creative capitalism’ – in short, ‘how is the value of creative labour measured?’ Creative labour’s ‘apparent autonomy’ establishes it ‘as a benchmark for other creative processes that seem to challenge the logics of industrial-capitalist organisation’. Creative practices ‘resist the abstractness’ of the measures imposed upon routinised labour, causing ‘a constant problem for capitalist businesses’ (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011: 83–4) synonymous with scientific management’s insufficiency in managing knowledge work characterised by a ‘post-bureaucratic’ absence of formalisation and standardisation (Hodgson and Briand, 2013).

Interrogating claims over the measurability of creative labour requires ‘detailed analyses of the metrics developed and deployed to measure value within the cultural and artistic sector’, as well as the study of ‘the impact of these discourses, metrics and control systems’ on the creative labour-process (Boehm and Land, 2009: 94). This article takes up this research agenda, drawing upon data collected over the course of 33 semi-structured interviews with workers in 10 graphic, branding and strategic design agencies in the UK and the Netherlands. Interviews explored events or situations where organisational measurements conflicted with participant experiences of work.

The article contributes to calls to reconnect the study of organisations with the concept of value (Prichard and Mir, 2010) by advancing an alternative theoretical understanding and empirical illustration of how time is measured and translated into value in the creative industries, and the antagonisms that emerge around these two processes. Theoretically, it contributes a novel critique of the immeasurability thesis, using the concept of SNLT to build on Hardt and Negri’s consideration of ‘digital Taylorism’ (see also Cole, Radice and Umney, 2020). Empirically, it contributes a case study of how creative agencies overcome the *problem* of measure through billable hours and the processes of formalisation and standardisation they imply, including timesheets and time-tracking technologies. Politically, the case study highlights how the persistence of measurement in the creative workplace incubates potential ‘value struggles’ (Frenzel and Beverungen, 2015), distinguishing between those that seek to make claims on value and those that seek to ‘break’ it.

Scientific management and social mediation

Taylorism measured individual worker performance with time-and-motion studies, producing collective standards of the ‘one best way’ to accomplish tasks. This system had the advantage of ‘removing managerial bias in capturing field data’ and establishing clear metrics workers negotiated over through trade unions (Gregg, 2016: 105–6). In this way, Taylorism is not simply an ‘offensive in the class struggle’ but also a ‘progressive step in the socialisation of the forces of production, both objective and subjective’ insofar as scientific management achieves efficiency through planning ‘informed by a body of socialised knowledge’ rather than ‘isolated, local struggles between workers and their bosses’ (Adler, 2004: 8). Under scientific management collective knowledge was objectified in formalised processes within the workplace, wherein workers’ situated ‘knowledge of specific tasks’ – ‘*how?, how much?, how long?, how many?*’ – was ‘appropriated’ by managers as a tool of organisation and exploitation (DeAngelis and Harvie, 2009: 4). The social character of the knowledge driving it removed the ‘mystery’ from the process, and the greater complexity of the division of labour generated a ‘collective worker’ comprising manifold perspectives and functions (Adler, 2004: 8). Whilst ‘absorbing cognitive labour’, Hardt and Negri

(2017: 188) argue, Taylorism also translated 'exploited labour' into a 'mass opposed to command' with 'new technical knowledges' at its disposal liberated from within its 'subjugation'.

Hardt and Negri (2017: 143) take forward this analysis to describe contemporary labour, wherein they propose coordination and performance become the autonomous and decentralised preserve of workers rather than management, struggling against absorption in new forms of 'digital Taylorism'. Whilst proceeding 'under capitalist authority', repetitiveness eroding autonomy and traditional resistance, Taylorism granted workers wage, skill and productivity gains, reduced 'arbitrary personal authority', and extended worker organisation and solidarity across professions (Adler, 2004: 8–9). However, this often involved managers imposing organisational logics that 'engineered' labour to certain preconceived ideas or results. Individualised measurement induced competitiveness between workers and eroded solidarity (Gregg, 2016: 113, 2018: 4). Whilst simultaneously socialising worker knowledge, Taylorism represented a 'war over measure' (DeAngelis and Harvie, 2009: 4).

Rather than upending the search for self-optimisation inherent in scientific management, Gregg (2018: x) suggests, the "immaterial" workloads of the contemporary workplace represent its continuation, albeit without the forms of resistance and worker representation institutionalised under Taylorism. Knowledge-intensive sectors individualise productivity even as the capacity to measure labour and output declines, comprehensively weakening the collective capacity to impose limits upon work through labour organisations. Even in collaborative workplaces, coordination confronts clashing individual schedules. Within individual professional work rhythms, the constant 'context switch' between tasks and meetings and the tech-driven plethora of 'windows, tabs and feeds' renders 'porous' the traditional 'physical and temporal architectures' of working life associated with Taylorism. Workers and bosses continue in a 'pointless quest' for a productiveness increasingly out-of-step with the conditions of the labour it measures. Handheld technologies and the increasingly 'logistical, administrative, and social' character of the expectations of professional work abolish 'fixed hours and locations' and 'measurable inputs and outputs' (Gregg, 2018: 6–8, 10).

Under Taylorism knowledge was situated and encoded internally to workplace processes of measurement and management. Postoperaist accounts of knowledge-intensive sectors, meanwhile, see knowledge as something external that enterprises struggle to capture and socialise. The measurability crisis postoperaists describe centres on this confrontation between spontaneously cooperative labour uncoordinated by capitalist command and firms' attempts to capture the resulting plenitude of value. In a stepchange from their earlier prognostications of a measurability crisis (Pitts, 2018), Hardt and Negri (2017: 213) stress that this situation need not imply that 'overflowing productive forces and the immeasurable values of the common sound the death knell of capital' itself, so long as financial and technological developments 'domesticate immeasurability' and 'stamp values on the immeasurable'. They see in the rise of financialisation an explanation for how measure persists in the face of crisis, with derivatives 'form[ing] a complex web of conversions among a wide range of forms of wealth' (Hardt and Negri, 2017: 165).

Analogously, algorithms and platforms enable a 'digital Taylorism' reinstating scientific management and rendering tasks measurable (Hardt and Negri, 2017: 131–2). Where the former financialised fix introduces increased economic and organisational instability, the latter technological fix confronts the resistance of contemporary immaterial labour to 'calculation, measure, and objectification'. Digital Taylorism, it is contended, temporarily suspends this not by pretending that 'all human and social phenomena are measurable', but rather by selecting only 'objective' data about work, setting aside the unquantifiable and autonomous 'subjectivity' that 'overflows and exceeds the objective measures stamped on it in the processes of capitalist valorization'. However, this places capital in the contradictory position of imprisoning the subjectivity of creative, social

labourers within ‘dimensions of industrial discipline’ that run the risk of ‘reducing productive powers and thwarting its own thirst for profit’ (Hardt and Negri, 2017: 143).

Where Hardt and Negri see novel workplace innovations tentatively restoring measure against what remains an underlying crisis, for others the problem of measure is by no means as novel as postoperaismo describes, there being a more fundamental tension between labour and value. Material good or immaterial service, no commodity’s value flows from the concrete labour-time that produced it (Caffentzis, 2013: 112). Between concrete labour and value lies a ‘social mediation’ established through the averaging of labours around socially-necessary labour-time (Clever, 2000: 119). SNLT is determined by, as Marx (1976: 129) writes, ‘the conditions of production normal for a given society and with the average degree of skill and intensity of labour prevalent in that society’. What is ‘average’ here is arbitrated by the market. The monetary exchange of its products socially validates labour’s conformity with the average ‘time taken’ for the production of goods and services according to ‘monetary social demand’ which, imposed upon the labour process, compels concrete labour to ‘occur within the time of its abstract measure’ – SNLT (Arthur, 2013; Bonefeld, 2010: 266–7; Heinrich, 2012: 51). Hence labour is not ‘immediately abstract’ in the manner Hardt and Negri describe, but made *mediately* abstract in the social relationship between concrete labour and exchange value expressed and enforced by SNLT.

Gesturing at a similar level of abstraction, Hardt and Negri’s recognition of finance’s capacity to equalise value across different economic activities touches upon the social and market-mediated character of measure. However, they situate what appears a novel means for the temporary suspension of the measurability crisis separate from and subsequent to production. This obscures the possible connection between the financial and technological fixes they identify at the level of the workplace in an age of ‘digital Taylorism’. The concept of SNLT illuminates how the mediation of production at the abstract level of the market shapes the measurement and management of labour itself. But postoperaists claim that SNLT is no longer the relevant measure for value in the conditions of immateriality characterising contemporary labour (Arvidsson, 2010: 637). Attributing this obsolescence to the perceived novelty of the immateriality of contemporary production elides the ‘immaterialist’ character of Marx’s theory, in which value, as a category of social mediation, was ‘hardly a material stuff’ (Caffentzis, 2013: 111).

Postoperaists, meanwhile, take a counterintuitively materialist approach to value. On one hand, Hardt and Negri’s (2017: 175) extension of the theorisation of value beyond production alone to encapsulate ‘the total cycle of capital’ captures the movement of measure at different levels of social abstraction beyond production in the market and society at large. But, on the other, they afford the moment of production an ontological priority, its import extended beyond the factory walls to fill the whole of social life itself. At base, Hardt and Negri (2017: 165) follow traditional Marxism in holding labour to be ‘the source of wealth in capitalist society’. But as Marx notes, situating value in the amount of labour expended in a commodity’s production implies that the commodity produced by the most ‘unskilful and lazy’ worker would have the most value (Marx, 1976: 129). The labour-time that determines value is instead that validated as socially necessary through the exchange of its products in the market. What is significant in determining value is not concrete labour’s immediate content but its social mediation as abstract labour in the interface between production and exchange.

This interface occupies the intersection between the monetary and workplace dynamics Hardt and Negri suggest temporarily suspend the measurability crisis. But they leave the connection between the two levels unconsidered owing to an underpinning theoretical aversion to the concept of mediation (Pitts, 2020). In their account of the ‘immediately abstract’ character of contemporary labour, for instance, exchange plays no part in rendering private labours social – they are always-already social (Hardt and Negri, 2017: 173). The relationship between the labour process and the

valorisation process is typically presented as immediate rather than mediated. For instance, financialised streams of speculation ‘extract value’ from the hard-to-capture expanse of value ‘buried in the earth and. . . embedded in society’ (Hardt and Negri, 2017: 159), as if value lies within things awaiting discovery rather than arising as a category of their social mediation. But monetary and financial logics intertwine with production more closely than such an immediate and productivist understanding would attest – arguably intertwining already in the workplace, where the labour-process acts as the mere ‘carrier’ of the valorisation-process as a whole (Arthur, 2013; Marx, 1976: 304).

In this sense, value determines and ‘organises’ labour (Harvie and Milburn, 2010: 631–2) rather than the reverse, as is typically considered the case in the Marxist tradition up to and including postoperaismo. Whilst ‘emerging from relationships amongst people’, value ‘then turns around to dominate these relationships’ (Harvie and Milburn, 2010: 635). From this perspective, measurement plays an active and not passive role with reference to the labour it measures, holding together only insofar as ‘value-producing labours are made commensurable in the final instance by the market’. On the basis that ‘what gets measured gets managed’, managers construct and impose measures that organise, mediate and validate concrete labour in line with ‘the competitive process and the market’ (Harvie and Milburn, 2010: 634).

DeAngelis and Harvie (2009) apply this understanding to the empirical example of how higher education institutions measure ‘immaterial labour’ through new metrics and standards. They refute the postoperaist ‘celebration’ of the immeasurability of ‘immaterial, self-organised and cooperative production’ and the redundancy of the law of value, highlighting instead how the ‘war of measure’ typifying Taylorism continues in knowledge-intensive work through the imposition of what they call ‘diachronic’ and ‘synchronic’ processes of measuring SNLT (DeAngelis and Harvie, 2009: 5–6). The first drives down the ‘labour-time socially-necessary for the ‘production’ of ideas’ through efficiencies and standards. The second commensurates heterogenous activities – both internally and externally – by abstracting from the specificities of academic labour ‘benchmarks and norms’ such as journal ratings, rankings and accreditation of courses and modules. This ‘constructs’ SNLT in line with expectations external rather than intrinsic to the ‘immaterial doings’ of the labour, the form it assumes in the market shaping its content (DeAngelis and Harvie, 2009: 26–7).

The example of how new benchmarks and metrics have been imposed in the higher education sector highlights the potential applicability of conventional means for overcoming the problem of measure. Sohn-Rethel’s (1978; Pitts, 2017: 40–43) application of the concept of SNLT to the Taylorist shopfloor hardens Hardt and Negri’s tentative conviction that scientific management retains some plausibility in describing measure’s persistence in a context of ‘digital Taylorism’. Sohn-Rethel’s (1978: 49) study showed that Taylorist measures of labour-time bore no ‘inherent’ relationship to its concrete duration. For Taylor work’s timing related less to how long something took as to how long it *should* take. Rather than anything objective to begin with, these standards issued from a ‘pretence’ which came to attain an objectivity through shaping labour – ‘the whole intention of Taylorism’ and ‘scientific job analysis’. The breaking down and measuring of work in time units measured not its reality but its conformity to the standard of SNLT. It disciplined the worker’s time-use, rather than measuring it, and in turn abstracted from the worker’s experience of the content and duration of work.

The ‘essence’ of Taylorism, then, is that ‘the standards of labour timing are not to be mistaken for the empiricism of the work as the workers themselves do it’ (Sohn-Rethel, 1978: 154). Concrete labour, ‘as it occurs. . . is not of itself quantifiable. . . in terms of labour-time unless the labour were identical [or] the actual differences, material or personal, were disregarded’ (Sohn-Rethel, 1978: 168). This disregarding is achieved in production through the ‘practical abstraction’ (Arthur, 2013)

whereby the ‘time of the act’ is ‘separate[d] from all its contents’ (Sohn-Rethel, 1978: 155). This takes a ‘coercive’ guise, enforcing upon labour a measurable character through implementation of processes and technologies of formalisation and standardisation (Sohn-Rethel, 1978: 170–2). Thus, ‘Taylor does not learn his time measure from the workers’, but rather ‘imparts the knowledge of it as the laws for their work’ (Sohn-Rethel, 1978: 154).

The ‘synthetic timing’ that defines the Taylorist work paradigm does not passively measure concrete labour, but rather represents a real abstraction that actively mediates concrete labour *through* measure. Evolving in the bricklaying studies of Taylor’s pupil Frank Gilbreth, synthetic timing breaks work down into units of a ‘fictitious norm of labour timing. . . construed without consulting or watching the worker, even for new jobs which have never yet been practised’ (Sohn-Rethel, 1978: 155). Facilitated by the coercion of factory discipline, synthetic timing abstracts from the reality of concrete labour an ideal representation to which it must then conform. This exposes how a divorce between the content of labour and the form of its measure is not cause for the crisis postoperaists identify. Rather, it presents a foundational problem characteristic of the labour-process as a carrier of the valorisation-process, overcome by imposing upon concrete labour an abstract measure validated in the market – SNLT – that articulates in production the relationship between labour and value eventually struck in exchange.

In imposing SNLT through synthetic timing, then, Taylorism represented an objective and subjective ‘socialisation’ of production, both internally among the workforce and externally vis-à-vis the market (Adler, 2004: 8). As a ‘form’ imposed upon the ‘content’ of the labour-process, the valorisation-process thus drives both ‘enabling’ effects – upgrading through greater socialisation and collectivisation – and ‘coercive’ – through greater intensification and exploitation (Adler, 2012). Insofar as they see a progressive potential for socialisation in the labour-process, Hardt and Negri grasp these ‘enabling’ consequences, but not their cause. They take for granted the existence of a spontaneous ‘direct socialisation’ of workers without employer management or worker organisation. On one hand, traditional forms of management are taken as inadequate to the task of appropriating and consolidating creativity and knowledge located externally to the labour-process within the labour-process in a measurable and manageable way. On the other, contemporary immaterial labour is taken to be inherently cooperative and immediately socialised without the necessity of worker organisation to achieve socialisation as a fruit of struggle.

Owing to an aversion to the concept of mediation, this obscures the ‘indirect’ and mediated character of socialisation in capitalist society, which occurs not directly in production itself but is ‘mediated by market exchange’ (Adler, 2012: 251). The expansive understanding of Taylorism as a mode of socialisation advocated in this article suggests that scientific management shapes ‘immaterial’ labour just as effectively as it did ‘material’ labour in previous phases of capitalist production (DeAngelis and Harvie, 2009: 27). Taylorism formalised private knowledge as social in bureaucratic processes of rationalisation and standardisation (Adler, 2012: 252–4). Work in the knowledge economy, whilst apparently immune to scientific management (Paton, 2013), has undergone a ‘rebureaucratisation’ (Hodgson and Briand, 2013) that formalises private knowledge as social through bureaucratic processes of rationalisation and standardisation similar to those of Taylorism (Adler, 2012: 252–4).

In the creative industries, creative labour is just as measured and managed as any other scientifically-managed labour-process (Smith and McKinlay, 2009: 15), with cultural production rationalised ‘both at the creative stage and the circulation stage’ (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011: 83–4). In this last respect, ‘tensions in the management of creativity are located largely outside the employment relationship’ (Thompson et al., 2007: 630), often imposing themselves in an active struggle ‘against the relative autonomy given to creative workers’ (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011: 83–4). This struggle over the socialisation of labour in line with the market manifests in a

'far greater continuity of conditions and concepts' of how work is measured and managed than allowed for in frameworks focused on the novelty of creative or 'immaterial' labour (Thompson et al., 2007: 626). This refocuses attention on the articulation of internal workplace dynamics with the external market context of creative industries as a genuinely 'industrial' site of production. As we see in the case study, pressures to win work and keep clients in a competitive market actively shape the conditions of creative labour, driving processes of 'standardisation and specialisation' (Thompson et al., 2016: 328) associated with scientific management.

A case in the creative industries: Measurability crisis or measurability problem?

The interviews show there is veracity to the claim creative labour is hard to measure. The 'fundamental problem' facing attempts to measure creative labour and its products is that 'they don't know what they're charging for' (Managing Director, November 2014). The question confronting creative agencies, from billing the client, quantifying company worth, and managing performance, is 'how do you capture this unquantifiable thing, this big idea?' This inscrutability cascaded down through the creative labour-process in the companies featured in the case study. The amount of time billed to clients constrains the 'deliverable' – a logo, a brand, a strategy – but products based on ideas and concepts are seldom predictable. In this context, traditional forms of scientific management were viewed as inappropriate for the content of the work and the character of the workers, because 'designers. . . are quite emotive people', requiring 'more management' than other groups of workers (Managing Director, November 2014).

In the creative agencies, the measurability crisis played out in the process of recording timesheets. Internally, timesheeting aids planning for future work, conforms with accounting standards, and allows agencies to gauge productivity. Externally, it produces a paper trail to convince potential big clients of rigorous accountability practices and sway potential buyers if the agency wishes to sell up. Timesheets are completed contemporaneously and retrospectively. One designer recorded her work hourly only to divide it into three-minute increments at the end of the day (Senior Designer, February 2014). Another had to record at fifteen-minute intervals as he worked (Designer, November 2014).

Difficulties arise where designers reconstruct their hours retrospectively, at the end of the day, week, or even month. One participant said he'd usually 'go two weeks without doing [his] timesheets and then do it retrospectively' (Designer, November 2014). Another 'suffered the pain' of reconstructing a month (Designer, January 2014). Reconstruction was difficult: 'you'll work two hours on one project and a couple of hours on that, and at the end of the day it is a little bit of guesswork' (Account Handler, February 2014). Participants in the case study would retrospectively generate timesheets grouping tasks into two – or three – hour chunks, despite the fragmented character of their own creative labour-process. Logging hours against multiple jobs simultaneously, each with their own tasks and conversations, obstructed an accurate contemporaneous record of time worked.

Antagonism surrounds how workers experience time pass versus how their organisations value their labour. Eight hours of time to the agency was quite different to a designer experiencing it as an internally fragmented duration brushing against the blurred lines between work and non-work (Designer, June 2014). On one hand, 'no matter what you're working on there's always more work to do, it's never finished. You can always invest another couple of hours thinking about it' (Designer, November 2014). On the other hand, hours allocated a job might far exceed the time it takes to address the brief: 'you can come up with an idea very quickly on one project, but equally it might take a month on another project, so to define how long it takes up front and then deliver against that is really quite tricky' (Creative Director, March 2014).

Spontaneity conflicts with time measurement based on working hours. A designer might spend 2 days struggling, ‘reading about something, reading the brief, redefining the brief, setting out exactly what it is they’re asking for’, but then an ‘idea happens in five seconds’ when all of a sudden they ‘look at two different things’ together, or at ‘three o’clock in the morning and you wake up with the idea’, or ‘when you’re just chatting to someone down at the pub, or chatting with your partner in the evening’ (Designer, January 2014). Participants seldom logged hours for this ‘out-of-work’ time, and nor would agencies sanction it. As one participant asserted, designers are measured in active working hours – in other words, quantity rather than quality – when the perceived value of the work maps uncomfortably against this measure (Designer, June 2014).

It is questionable, however, whether this disjunction proves fatal to firms’ capacity to measure creative labour – in other words, whether we witness a measurability crisis or a *measurability problem*. In spite of creative labour’s inscrutability, the evidence illustrates how measure persists not in terminal breakdown but as a perpetual problem firms tackle. Indeed, scientific management has surprising relevance to how creative labour is organised and measured. In the case study companies, agency life was mediated by a ‘fictitious norm of labour timing’: the billable hour. Billables represent a system of pricing and internal accounting whereby creative agencies charge clients a set number of working hours priced according to the salary of the junior and senior staff tasked with realising the brief – sometimes rolled up into a single hourly rate – as well as taking account of overheads like rent, electricity and heating. Margins are usually costed into the price of an hour, agencies in some cases aiming to beat the number of hours billed. On the studio floor, hours are recorded in line with budgets of time allocated to certain projects. Establishing in practice the abstract, standardised time of business represented by and to the client, billable hours mediate how creative labour is performed and experienced. For instance, where work was not performed to the temporal expectations embedded in the contract with the client, the number of hours employees recorded on the timesheets they completed reflected the original budget of hours billed to clients and allocated to individual workers rather than the hours worked in practice.

The billable hour system responds to a situation whereby the work in question is ‘difficult to value’ – but not, crucially, impossible to value (Yakura, 2001: 1077). Billables transform ‘the ‘chaotic flow’ of the working day into something quantifiable’ through ‘the flow of work-time being quantified and valued through the technology of billable hours’ (Alvehus and Spicer, 2012: 501). Whilst acting as a marker of performance, billables also ‘legitimate the value’ of the work in question, ‘assigning uniform rates to the hours billed’ even where ‘realities belie that uniformity’ (Yakura, 2001: 1077). At many agencies featured in the study, billables thus resembled the synthetic timing associated with the imposition of SNLT in the Taylorist factory. The concept of SNLT reveals how billable hours represent a *pre-facto* construction, measure sustained through the mediation of the labour-process in line with monetary social demand established in the valorisation-process. The measure is thus not passive but active, imposing market conditions and client expectations on the management and performance of creative labour.

In a competitive industrial context, agencies have gone from being courted by clients based on their ‘portfolio or reputation’ to being ‘appointed through a tender process’ (Designer, January 2014) wherein agencies pitch for work from clients. Despite being the most ‘creative time’ of the whole process (Designer, January 2014), the time spent on the pitch is not directly charged out to the eventual client and, where the agency succeeds, must be recouped at a later stage in the job or, where unsuccessful, notionally recouped against other jobs. As a Creative Director explained, ‘we effectively do a phase of work for free just to secure the work, and then we’ll associate those hours to the project later on’ (Creative Director, March 2014). Indeed, agencies often ‘agree to terms far below cost’ to secure work from clients to begin with (Yakura, 2001: 1086, 1088–9), market conditions mediating the content of the work before it has even begun.

In the case study companies, this time pressure fell unevenly across agency staff according to a division of labour between junior, middleweight and senior designers, as well as creative directors and strategists. Whereas these latter senior staff perform the pitch free of the constraints of the billable hour but with their time costing more internally, junior staff tasked with completing the job if the pitch succeeds confront pressure to make up the value of the time already expended at the earlier conceptual stage. This reflects a division of labour between more conceptual work and the practical implementation of designs, with different levels of seniority attached. The tender process places agencies at a deficit, shaping how time is managed in line with, and sometimes under or over, the hours billed to clients, with some staff disproportionately enduring this external imposition of measure.

The pre-facto mediation of the creative labour-process by billable hours is driven by a metric integral to internal accounting in the agencies featured in the study: the utilisation rate, the total number of total working hours billed out to clients. The utilisation rate 'totally determines the survival of the firm', showing how much of the firm's time generates income from clients (Alvehus and Spicer, 2012: 501). Even where important, firms minimise 'studio' or 'sales' 'non-chargeable' hours encapsulating internal activities like meetings and training, as well as external activities like networking, in pursuit of activities assigned productiveness on the basis of billable hours. Resembling the individualised and collective 'coercive' timing of comparison and competition Sohn-Rethel sees underpinning the development of the 'fictitious norms' of synthetic timing in the Taylorist factory, this is used as a disciplinary measure, with one company unveiling the 'amount of unbilled hours,' and 'how much money that loses' the firm, at an end-of-year team meeting (Designer, January 2015). The injunction to 'make every minute chargeable' leads to unusual behaviour such as the designer who found himself wandering around the studio seeing if 'anyone wanted any help' so as 'to find something to fill up' his timesheet and boost his rate of 'effective' to non-effective hours (Designer, November 2014).

The demand to make every hour of the day billable coincides with the company's own financial interest in the maximum possible number of hours being 'utilised' and charged to clients. This financialises working life, introducing logics of investment, budgeting, measurement and monetary value to every minute of labour-time aided by the close monitoring made possible by new technologies. These processes of 'financialized control' connect the most everyday aspects of the work performed to the overarching logic of profitability, company value, cost margins and time utilisation, inculcating this logic within the sensibilities of workers (Alvehus and Spicer, 2012). This connects the 'financial' and 'technological' fixes Hardt and Negri see capital deploying to confront the problem of measure, relating valuation at the level of the market to the 'digital Taylorism' of contemporary knowledge work, centring on a close relationship between the firm as a financial entity and the everyday experience of working and recording hours. A subsidiary of a FTSE100 conglomerate had the most overtly financialised character, its finance department, rather than a production manager, assuming responsibility for 'chasing up timesheets' (Account Handler, February 2014). A 'lady in finance', explained a senior designer, now 'keeps score of everybody's billable hours' and gives 'lessons' in how to fill in timesheets (Senior Designer, February 2014).

This interweaving of financialised logics and workplace life shows that Hardt and Negri's financial fix does not unfold externally to firms and the workplace through the abstractive and calculative functions of the financial markets alone. Rather, the valorisation-process mediates within the labour-process itself the digital Taylorism they correctly associate with contemporary work. This centres on a fictitious norm of timing – the billable hour – that tentatively articulates what goes in the workplace with the value its result attains in the market according to monetary social demand, via the measure of the 'time taken' expressed in the price for the job. This suggests

that, mediating the labour-process itself, financialised imperatives represent more than a purely retrospective attempt to capture and commensurate the immeasurable value of knowledge work.

As well as having a 'pre-facto' mediating effect on labour's performance, billable hours 'almost always' also represent a 'post-facto construction' when compared to how staff complete the contracted work, which varies above and below the hours charged (Alvehus and Spicer, 2012: 501–2). Indeed, some creative agencies in the case study actively encouraged the reproduction of fictitious norms of timing, whereby the hours recorded reflected the hours billed and not those expended. Some companies recorded hours worked on one job as worked on another to maintain the impression of profitability, either retrospectively by an account handler or contemporaneously by designers entering hours against a different job code on the time-tracking software. The time as recorded filters reality through the expectations of the time for the job established in the initial contract with the client. The contract, and not the performance of the work it records, constructs the 'reality' of concrete labour as it appears on the timesheet. The labour attains validity as abstract labour emptied of content by conforming to the forms of measure implied by monetary social demand, in line with SNLT.

Reflecting these processes, accounts of creative labour highlight the re-imposition of bureaucratic cultures of audit and timekeeping associated with scientifically managed workplaces. Whereas the advent of the creative labour practised by the employees of such firms promised flexible working free of all fixed routine, knowledge workers 'punch time cards' just like their forefathers in the Taylorist factory (Ross, 2003: 31) because the labour-process remains the carrier of the valorisation-process and its criterion of social validation, SNLT. In this respect trends towards systematisation and routinisation are imposed by the 'greater economic role' design and advertising assume in 'advanced capitalist societies' (Moor and Julier, 2009: 13), creative agencies playing a pivotal role in the circulation of goods and services over which client firms are locked in competition. The organisational vector for the importing of client expectations as a structuring principle of the creative labour-process is the 'client services' or account management team, who represent the wishes of the client within the agency. Client services are the first point of contact for clients, channelling their desired outcomes into a creative brief document resembling a 'quasi-legal agreement' certifying the scope and character of the work package (Dorland, 2009: 108–12). Client services iteratively mediate between individual designers and clients, both communicating and rendering 'tangible' to designers client demands and changes, as well as monitoring timesheets and reporting progress against budgets of billable hours (Account Handler, February 2014).

Client services translate cultures of audit and accountability prevalent in both public and private sectors into processes of rationalisation and formalisation. Increasing client demand for 'transparency' in the wake of the Great Recession (Senior Designer, March 2014) was exemplified by an international fashion brand with strict 'protocol and policy' around procurement requiring itemised accounts of who worked what hours on a given project (Production Manager, July 2014). Where agencies attain the status of client 'brand guardians', robust guidelines guarantee conformity of all work to the standards expected. Because the organisation of design asserts a direct relationship between time and money, and uncertainty and unknowability characterise the outcomes of creative work, emphasis falls upon structures and devices to expedite and codify work against these standards (Dorland, 2009: 113). Other elements of the industrial context intrude too, the pressures of competition and spiralling urban rent and business rates forcing one company to impose new time monitoring regimes. The forms through which firms measure and manage creative labour are thus a function not of the immediate content of the labour itself but its mediation in and by the market.

The most prominent location of antagonism around this process is the system of timesheeting and the technologies implemented to formalise it. As Yakura (2001: 1092–3) comments in her study of billables in the IT sector, '[t]he system hides the fact that units of time are not fungible.

One hour of one consultant's time is certainly not equivalent to 1 hour of a different consultant's time. For that matter, 2 different hours of the same consultant's time is rarely equivalent'. Yet the practice of billable hours operates on the assumption of comparability. Despite the difficulty creatives faced completing timesheets due to the incompatibility of the work they performed with its prevailing measures, agencies in the case study implemented disciplinary regimes to coerce designers to complete their timesheets. Timesheet discipline was 'drummed into' workers continuously (Designer, January 2014). If an employee ran over the time they were allocated on a particular job at the beginning of the day, the Production Manager would be 'on your case'. One designer described how 'there's an email sent around with the usual suspects', with a screenshot of the weekly time-use data and a note saying 'this one's missing' (Designer, November 2014). These steps enforced the logic of the utilisation rate, linking time to money and labour to value.

However, attempts at chasing up timesheets met with resistance. As one Production Manager charged with the responsibility of chasing timesheets observed, 'everybody hates doing timesheets' (Production Manager, July 2014). It is 'an unsolved problem' (Managing Director, November 2014). The search for a solution to creative labour's quantitative inscrutability has generated a range of technologies and software. Although some companies used paper timesheets, employees at most agencies were responsible for inserting data into time-monitoring programmes designed for ease of use so 'people don't spend ages doing timesheets' (Senior Designer, March 2014). Monitoring the work of designers, breaking it up into 'ever-smaller' and more measurable and auditable 'components of. . .time' (Moor and Julier, 2009: 10), these technologies assign an account to each client project, against which individual designer discretion determines the entry of hours. The designer selects the project from a list of open jobs, documenting the time spent on the project, providing a written account of the activities carried out in the allotted time and allocating these activities into the various pro-forma subcategories available on the program. This occurs in real-time or retrospectively. In this system, an hour registered is assumed to represent an hour worked – working on a similarly 'fictitious' norm of 'synthetic timing' Sohn-Rethel associates with the implementation of technology in the Taylorist workplace. Indeed, these technologies resemble the socialisation and objectification of knowledge in the formalised systems of scientific management, with a participant describing one software package as the '*brain* of the company, all the projects are on there, all the budget sheets get uploaded onto there, and all the billable hours get put on there aswell' (Account Handler, February 2014).

The achievement of synthetic timing, for Sohn-Rethel, had its basis in the coercion embedded in factory organisation. Along these lines, the compulsion to complete timesheets was written into the software used at the case study companies. One sent out a reminder 'every Friday afternoon around 4pm' (Production Manager, July 2014). Another would prevent employees from logging on to their computer in the morning if they had not completed their timesheet at the end of the day before. These punitive measures produce data subsequently used to monitor how designers met their hours collectively and individually. Designers 'pump into the system the job number and how much time they've spent' so that production managers can check 'how much time has been spent to how much time has been quoted' (Production Manager, July 2014)

Providing 'new means for connecting workers' efforts to the profitability of the organization' (Moor and Julier, 2009: 10), the software 'facilitate[s] much more detailed analyses than were previously possible of the profitability of particular clients and projects, and allow[s] a similar logic to be applied to the contributions of individual staff members' (Production Manager, July 2014). Indeed, one program popular with advertising agencies – 'a beast of a machine' – would issue an alert to the CEO if the project strayed over budget. The disciplinary effect of the technology compelled workers to make the full forty hours of their week billable, and, if they didn't, 'conversations start happening'.

When this technological system of reporting and recording hours works to plan, the ‘valorization of time’ billables enforce is accomplished ‘invisibly and seamlessly’ by means of ‘automatic and mundane’ procedures of accounting and monitoring (Yakura, 2001: 1077). The routineness and seamlessness of this process has tendency to ‘mask certain anomalies’ which arise in the completing the billed work (Yakura, 2001: 1084–6). In the face of the problem of measurability, then, firms return to the standard of the ‘time taken’ established in the contract with the client. Moreover, the technology helps set the standard governing future work, with reference to the synthetic timing the valorisation-process imprints upon the labour-process. The data rendered via time-tracking software produces quantitative proof of an agency’s capacity to ‘deliver a large project on time’ that ‘you can then use as a case study and a basis to promote yourself for other work’ (Production Manager, January 2014).

These technologies not only reflect the pre-existing social conditions of labour and its measurement, but also shape it (Moor and Julier, 2009), setting into motion the fictitious norms of timing associated with SNLT. In an exemplary case of where a true record of expended labour was dispensed with in favour of a simple reflection of time billed established by ‘automatic and mundane’ administrative procedures, one designer would auto-fill their timesheet with the original schedule of hours set out in the budget derived from the amount billed to the client. The rule of the billable hour is not always effectively imposed by timesheets, technology and human input, but can always fall back upon the ‘time taken’ implied in the price for the job.

The formalised procedures of allocating and recording hours frequently assumed the form of direct routines of coercion and control reminiscent of the Taylorist factory floor. Meanwhile, like those processes they also granted workers both an individual and collective grasp of the inner mechanics of how their work was managed and valued, around which lies at least a hypothetical potential to organise and bargain. Little open conflict ensued around these issues in the workplaces studied. However, there were competing partial perspectives on the value of an hour at stake between company, client and creative. Even though the problem of measurability was temporarily suspended through the billables system, the measures were often out of step with the underlying creative endeavour. The invoiced hours succumb to ‘contextual events and factors’, producing disputes over the exact valuation of billed hours between different members of the company hierarchy that expose ‘the arbitrary nature of the valuation process’ (Yakura, 2001: 1077). These ‘breaches’, whereby the equivalence between time and money breaks down, render visible the ‘taken-for-granted process through which time is transformed into money’.

One aspect where this transparency produced antagonisms around the valuation of labour is ‘arbitrage’ (Alvehus and Spicer, 2012: 506), whereby employers ‘exploit differential rates for billable hours between seniors and juniors within the firm’. In common with many formalised systems for measuring and standardising labour, billables render transparent to workers the worth of their work to company and client. At a job’s commencement, agencies agree a ballpark price based on the client’s budget and the desirability of retaining the client’s custom. The fee is divided among the human resources at their disposal. As the client’s wishes become clearer in the early iterative stages and the project mutates, they will revisit the initial schedule of hours and ‘pull a few hours or days out from people’s allocations and meet the requirement’ (Creative Director, March 2014), often motivated by a need to meet the project outcomes on a tight turnaround or budget having ‘overpromised’ to a client they hope to retain for future contracts. Whilst billable hours price out workers according to levels of conceptual or strategic skill, this sometimes entails the outcome that they substitute for one another when the fixed demarcations of their roles place constraints on the agency’s capacity to complete the job on time and budget.

The arbitrage process exacerbates the disconnect between how firms price out an hour of work and the meaning of this hour to the worker. Knowing the real cost of their work to company and

client, junior members of staff are left lacking a sense of 'self-worth' when plugging gaps in the division of labour usually filled by better-paid and more strategically-focused colleagues, with no extra pay (Designer, July 2014). From the perspective of a Managing Director of a large agency, when confronted with the issue of 'whether you put the junior's cost, or the senior's cost' in a case where the former has stepped in for the latter, 'it's very simple – you put the senior's cost' (Managing Director, November 2014).

The imposition of SNLT upon any labour-process centres on a struggle between how workers live and experience labour and its real abstraction in measure (DeAngelis and Harvie, 2009: 15–6). Agencies, in chasing what a Managing Director called 'a true representation', wage a struggle to prevent workers recording what he characterised as '*my truth*', the individual self-perception of what one has worked – a 'psychological problem that negates our mechanics of timesheeting' (Managing Director, November 2014). Vying perspectives at different points in the company hierarchy create partial accounts of the true time and value of the work.

Whilst this antagonistic relation is mediated in apparently non-hierarchical and intrinsically-motivated company cultures, the imposition of these measures in practices like timesheeting assumed an increasingly vexed character where they impacted upon the wellbeing of workers. Facing financial pressures, one agency installed time-tracking software to monitor designers as they worked, removing the requirement to complete timesheets retrospectively. Despite management stating the intention was not to surveil workers, one participant described the imposition of this technology as a 'rupture point' that disrupted the 'comfort' they possessed to do 'more interesting work' within the confines of a project (Designer, January 2015). Whereas previously, the company billed a fixed fee, now this became translated into individual hours, with an attendant effect on the structure and experience of work. 'I spent a year there completely demoralised about the time I was working, the money I was being paid and the control I had', said the participant. Rather than creative labour exceeding the confines of capitalist control and measure as in celebratory postoperaist accounts, the latter imposes itself so successfully as to exhaust the human input on which the industry depends – a paradox Hardt and Negri appreciate, but with more sanguine implications than their optimistic appraisal permits. Exposing a *problem* of measurability, and not the debilitating crisis theorists of immaterial labour imagine, there was little evidence that the breaches described in the case study will break out into identifiable labour struggles any time soon.

Conclusion: Towards value struggles

Against the argument that creative labour cannot be scientifically managed and is subject to a crisis of measurability, conventional forms of management and measurement persist in the creative industries through the system of billable hours by which agencies relate labour-time to value internally and externally. Articulating the relationship between what goes on in the workplace and its mediation in the market in ways reminiscent of scientific management, the measurability problem is temporarily suspended through conventional means of formalisation and rebureaucratisation akin to the process of objectification Hardt and Negri ascribe to 'digital Taylorism'. This accomplishes in the concrete context of the workplace precisely the 'conversion' and equalisation Hardt and Negri associate with the financialised fix derivatives effect in the economy at its most social and abstract level. Like the 'synthetic timing' measured in the Taylorist factory, billable hours do not capture a pre-existing reality but mediate labour through fictitious norms of timing conforming to a standard of SNLT determined by monetary demand. Market imperatives seep into workplace life through the mediation billable hours establish between the concrete lived experience of the labour-process and how it is abstracted from in the valorisation-process, imposing the logic of the latter upon the former. In this context measurability faces crisis only insofar

as measurement is understood as a passive activity reflecting reality as opposed to an active practice of management that bends reality to preformed commercial expectations. Their capacity to temporarily overcome the conditions of crisis means that creative agencies confront measure not in crisis, but as a *problem*.

In line with Hardt and Negri's own political conceptualisation of the relationship between subjectivity and crisis, what would it take to exacerbate the problem of measure such that creative labour realises the conditions of crisis they describe? One route would be through conventional labour struggles associated with scientifically-managed workplaces. The 'indirect socialisation' the valorisation-process imposes upon the labour-process under scientific management creates a tendency toward exploitation whilst simultaneously constructing bonds between workers in resistance against that exploitation. Stimulated by 'valorisation pressures', the formalisation and standardisation of workplace life grants knowledge an increasingly social character and the labour-process an increasingly collective quality whilst also establishing processes and structures through which working practices and the 'organizational architecture' that supports them can be understood and challenged by workers through channels of 'conflict resolution' and 'bureaucratic escalation' that depersonalise and formalise class struggle in the workplace. At the same time, 'bureaucratic formalization and standardization of routines' can also act as 'weapons of coercion', underpinned by 'the conflictuality of the employment relation' (Adler, 2012: 252–4).

Hardt and Negri's work in the nineties and early noughties rejected this mediated mode of class conflict, celebrating instead a spontaneously cooperative and structureless form of resistance on the part of the 'multitude' of contemporary immaterial labourers. But their recent work suggests a reappraisal of the relevance of structure and organisation to worker struggle in parallel with the re-imposition of Taylorism in the digital workplace. The familiarity of many of the aspects of formalisation and standardisation found in the contemporary creative industries, and the forms of measure they imply, would appear to suggest the continuing relevance of the framework of industrial conflict that accompanies these tendencies. Workers in the creative agencies studied have recourse to three crucial elements underpinning the possibility of organising: trigger issues, common measures and leverage points. In terms of trigger issues, there was evidence of exploitation and intensification workers could enumerate in clear and transparent quantitative measures of their work. Akin to those around which unions bargained in the Taylorised factory, these common measures constitute a potential basis for creative workers to 'make claims on value' (Thoelen and Zanoni, 2016) by negotiating time, wage and productivity deals with employers. As Elzenbaumer and Guilani (2014: 458) note, 'there is a need to create solidarity between designers, to develop a strong sense of the value of their work and of tactics to claim it strategically as well as collectively'. As a possible framework for laying claim to value, there is growing evidence of unionisation among creative workers in other fields (Cohen and de Peuter, 2020; Woodcock, 2019).

As well as trigger issues around exploitation and intensification and common measures around which to negotiate, the pivotal position of creative industries in the circuit of capital grants creatives significant leverage in industrial disputes and stoppages. This is especially the case at a time of crisis where fields like advertising enable firms to compete to connect a constrained customer base with an oversupply of unsold stock inventory (Pitts, 2015). Indeed, the centrality of advertising to the 'sales effort' is such that its 'elimination would require the elimination of capitalism' (Baran and Sweezy, 2013). Take, for instance, a 'branding strike' modelled on the 'art strikes' of the sixties and nineties (Shukaitis, 2015). Where assembly-line stoppages prevent the production of goods, the threat to temporarily curtail advertising through strike action prevents their social validation in exchange – precipitating a crisis of measure pitched at the abstract social level of the valorisation-process itself.

However, the vocational character of creative work complicates traditional labour organising based on such dynamics of bargaining and leverage. Whilst ‘labor politics was once premised on the idea of placing limits on work – reducing hours, resisting speed up, guarding rights and benefits – in today’s industrial settings the challenge is to adapt this politics to an environment which fails to recognize work as laborious’ and instead recodes it as an intrinsically-motivated ‘life’s work’ characteristic of that found in the creative industries (Gregg, 2016: 114). More in keeping with the vocational quality creative work possesses, a second kind of ‘value struggle’ based on the politicisation of design represents other possibilities for how creatives might scale up the problem of measure to construct a crisis. Since the twentieth century fields like advertising have enabled artists and creatives to subsist whilst pursuing their vocation, navigating with difficulty the ‘intersection between art and commerce’ (Kelly, 2014: 68) by lending ‘their artistic skills to purposes in which they themselves do not believe’ (Baran and Sweezy, 2013). This tension, combined with the pivotal position of these workers in the cultural apparatus, generates the potential for creatives to ‘challenge structures of power. . . rather than acting as mere transmitters or translators engaged in the social reproduction of the existing powerful’ (Durrer and O’Brien, 2014: 103).

This could take shape in the retooling of creative work to design for other social or political values rather than exchange value alone (Elzenbaumer, 2014), or extend to the socialisation of the cultural apparatus itself by ‘reestablishing the relationship between the consumer and producer of cultural work by undermining the estrangement from human needs and capacities enforced [in] bourgeois society’ (Foster and McChesney, 2013). Such ambitions threaten a crisis of measure by embracing the frustrated artistic and artisan ideal of pure symbolic expenditure concealed in creative labour, its creations freed of the finality of production and exchange (Baudrillard, 1973: 98–100). However, just as the crisis of measure is not given but must be constructed, the value struggles that precipitate it will not arise spontaneously or immediately, but through organisation and mediation. In this sense, harnessing the calculative affordances of digital Taylorism to lay claim to value by replicating conventional forms of worker organisation may represent a basis for the development of broader alternatives for sustaining creative lifestyles in sympathy with other ‘values’ altogether.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to the Editor and three anonymous reviewers for their extraordinarily insightful and supportive comments, as well as Werner Bonefeld, Ana Dinerstein, Jeff Henderson, Theo Papadopoulos, Greg Schwartz, Peter Turnbull and Patrizia Zanoni for comments on various previous iterations. Thanks also to participants and discussants at the International Labour Process Conference (March 2018), the Academy of Management Annual Meeting (August 2016) and the Work, Employment & Society Conference (September 2016), as well as presentations of earlier versions at the Centre for Organisations and Society, Durham Business School (November 2018), the Global Political Economy Research Cluster, University of Manchester (October 2018), the Centre for Employment Relations, Innovation and Change, University of Leeds (April 2018) and the Fairness at Work Research Centre, Alliance Manchester Business School (February 2017).

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was funded by Economic and Social Research Council grant number ES/J50015X/1 (The Social Validation of Abstract Labour-Time: A Case Study of Billable Hours in the Design and Advertising Industry), with additional support from a Short-Term Scientific Mission funded by EU COST Action IS1202: The Dynamics of Virtual Work (‘E-Rhythms in Freelance Creative Work’) and an ESRC Impact Accelerator Award (‘Beyond the Billable Hour: Alternatives to the Timesheet’).

ORCID iD

Frederick Harry Pitts  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3749-6340>

References

- Adler, P. S. (2004) 'Skill Trends Under Capitalism and the Socialisation of Production', in C. Warhurst, I. Grugulis and W. Keep (eds) *The Skills That Matter*, pp. 242–60. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Adler, P. S. (2012) 'The Sociological Ambivalence of Bureaucracy', *Organization Science* 23(1): 244–66.
- Alvehus, J. and Spicer, A. (2012) 'Financialization As a Strategy of Workplace Control in Professional Service Firms', *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 23: 497–510.
- Arthur, C. (2013) 'The Practical Truth of Abstract Labour', in R. Bellofiore, G. Starosta and P. Thomas (eds) *In Marx's Laboratory*, pp. 101–20. Leiden: Brill.
- Arvidsson, A. (2010) 'The Ethical Economy', *Organization* 17(5): 637–44.
- Baran, P. A. and Sweezy, P. M. (2013) 'Theses on Advertising', *Monthly Review* 65(3): 34–42.
- Baudrillard, J. (1973) *The Mirror of Production*. New York: Telos.
- Boehm, S. and Land, C. (2009) 'No Measure for Culture?', *Capital & Class* 97: 75–98.
- Bonefeld, W. (2010) 'Abstract Labour', *Capital & Class* 34(2): 257–76.
- Caffentzis, G. (2005) 'Immeasurable Value?', *The Commoner* 10: 87–114.
- Caffentzis, G. (2013) *In Letters of Blood and Fire*. Oakland: PM Press.
- Cleaver, H. (2000) *Reading Capital Politically*. Edinburgh: AK Press.
- Cohen, N. S. and de Peuter, G. (2020) *New Media Unions*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Cole, M., Radice, H. and Umney, C. (2020) 'The political economy of datafication and work: A new digital Taylorism?', *Socialist Register* 57: 78–99.
- DeAngelis, M. and Harvie, D. (2009) 'Cognitive Capitalism and the Rat-Race', *Historical Materialism* 17(3): 3–30.
- Dorland, A. (2009) 'Routinized Labour in the Graphic Design Studio', in G. Julier and L. Moor (eds) *Design and Creativity*, pp. 105–21. Oxford: Berg.
- Dowling, E., Nunes, R. and Trott, B. (2007) 'Immaterial and Affective Labour', *Ephemera* 7(1): 1–7.
- Durrer, V. and O'Brien, D. (2014) 'Rethinking Cultural Intermediaries', in J. Smith Maguire and J. Matthews (eds) *The Cultural Intermediaries Reader*, pp. 124–38. London: Sage.
- Elzenbaumer, B. (2014) *Designing economic cultures*. PhD Thesis, Goldsmiths, University of London, London.
- Elzenbaumer, B. and Giuliani, C. (2014) 'Designers' Inquiry', *Ephemera* 14(3): 451–59.
- Foster, J. B. and McChesney, R. W. (2013) 'The Cultural Apparatus of Monopoly Capital', *Monthly Review* 65(3): 1–33.
- Frenzel, F. and Beverungen, A. (2015) 'Value Struggles in the Creative City', *Urban Studies* 52(6): 1020–36.
- Gregg, M. (2016) 'The Athleticism of Accomplishment', in J. Wajcman and N. Dodd (eds) *The Sociology of Speed*, pp. 102–16. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gregg, M. (2018) *Counterproductive*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Hardt, M. and Negri, A. (2017) *Assembly*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Harvie, D. and Milburn, K. (2010) 'How Organizations Value and How Value Organizes', *Organization* 17(5): 631–6.
- Heinrich, M. (2012) *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Karl Marx's Capital*. New York: Monthly Review.
- Hesmondhalgh, D. and Baker, S. (2011) *Creative Labour*. London: Routledge.
- Hodgson, D. and Briand, L. (2013) 'Controlling the Uncontrollable', *Work, Employment and Society* 27(2): 308–25.
- Kelly, A. (2014) 'Advertising', in J. Smith Maguire and J. Matthews (eds) *The Cultural Intermediaries Reader*, pp. 67–76. London: Sage.
- Lazzarato, M. (1996) 'Immaterial Labor', in P. Virno and M. Hardt (eds) *Radical Thought in Italy*, pp. 133–50. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Marazzi, C. (2008) *Capital and Language*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).

- Marx, K. (1976) *Capital*. Vol. I. London: Penguin.
- Moor, L. and Julier, G. (2009) 'Introduction', in *Design and Creativity*, pp. 1–22. Oxford: Berg.
- Paton, S. (2013) 'Introducing Taylor to the Knowledge Economy', *Employee Relations* 35(1): 20–38.
- Pitts, F. H. (2015) 'Creative industries, value theory and Michael Heinrich's new reading of Marx', *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique*, 13(1): 192–222.
- Pitts, F. H. (2017) *Critiquing Capitalism Today: New Ways to Read Marx*. New York: Palgrave.
- Pitts, F. H. (2018) 'A crisis of measurability? Critiquing post-operaismo on labour, value and the basic income', *Capital & Class* 42(1): 3–21.
- Pitts, F. H. (2020) 'The Multitude and the Machine: Productivism, Populism, Posthumanism', *Political Quarterly* 91(2): 364–372.
- Prichard, C. and Mir, R. (2010) 'Organizing Value', *Organization* 17(5): 507–15.
- Ross, A. (2003) *No-Collar*. New York: Basic Books.
- Shukaitis, S. (2015) 'Art Strikes and the Metropolitan Factory', in M. Kozowski, et al. (eds) *Joy Forever*, pp. 227–36. London: Mayfly.
- Smith, C. and McKinlay, A. (eds) (2009) *Creative Labour*. London: Macmillan.
- Sohn-Rethel, A. (1978) *Intellectual and Manual Labour*. London: Macmillan.
- Thoelen, A. and Zanoni, P. (2016) 'Making Claims on Value', *Culture & Organization* 22(4): 287–310.
- Thompson, P., Jones, M. and Warhurst, C. (2007) 'From Conception to Consumption', *Journal of Organizational Behaviour* 28: 625–40.
- Thompson, P., Parker, R. and Cox, S. (2016) 'Interrogating Creative Theory and Creative Work', *Sociology* 50(2): 316–32.
- Vercellone, C. (2010) 'The Crisis of the Law of Value and the Becoming-Rent of Profit', in A. Fumagalli and S. Mezzadra (eds) *Crisis in the Global Economy*, pp. 85–118. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).
- Woodcock, J. (2019) 'Organizing in the Game Industry', *New Labor Forum* 29(1): 50–7.
- Yakura, E. K. (2001) 'Billables: The Valorization of Time in Consulting', *American Behavioral Scientist* 44(7): 1076–95.

Author biography

Frederick Harry Pitts is a Lecturer in Work, Employment, Organisation and Public Policy at University of Bristol School of Management, where he also leads the Faculty of Social Sciences and Law Research Group for Perspectives on Work and co-edits the Bristol University Press online magazine *Futures of Work*. He is the author of *Value* (Polity, 2021), *A World Beyond Work: Labour, Money and the Capitalist State Between Crisis and Utopia* (Emerald, 2021, with Ana Dinerstein), *Corbynism: A Critical Approach* (Emerald, 2018, with Matt Bolton) and *Critiquing Capitalism Today: New Ways to Read Marx* (Palgrave, 2017).