Capitalism and Urbanization in a New Key?
The Cognitive-Cultural Dimension

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The cognitive-cultural dimensions of contemporary capitalism are identified by reference to its leading sectors, basic technologies, labor relations systems and market structures. Cognitive-cultural systems of production and work come to ground preeminently in large city regions. This state of affairs is manifest in the diverse clusters of high-technology sectors, service functions, neo-artisanal manufacturing activities and cultural-products industries that are commonly found in these regions. It is also manifest in the formation of a broad stratum of high-skill, cognitive-cultural employees in urban areas. Many of these employees are engaged in distinctive forms of work-based learning, creativity and innovation. At the same time, the cognitive-cultural economy in contemporary cities is invariably complemented by large numbers of low-wage, low-skill jobs, and the individuals drawn into these jobs are often migrants from developing countries. The ideological-cum-political ramifications of this situation are subject to analysis in the context of a critique of the currently fashionable idea of the “creative city.” I advance the claim that we need to go beyond advocacies about local economic development that prescribe the deployment of packages of selected amenities as a way of attracting elite workers into given urban areas. Instead, I propose that policy makers should pay more attention to the dynamics of the cognitive-cultural production system as such, and that in the interests of shaping viable urban communities in contemporary capitalism we must be more resolute in attempts to rebuild sociability, solidarity and democratic participation.

Capitalism and Urbanization

Wherever capitalism makes its historical and geographical appearance, peculiar patterns and rising levels of urbanization invariably ensue. This condition follows from pressures in capitalist economic systems that lead persistently to the formation of large aggregations of physical capital and human labor on the landscape. On the one hand, selected groups of profit-seeking firms, especially when they are meshed together in diverse functional interdependencies, have a definite tendency to locate near their common center of gravity. On the other hand, masses of individual workers are typically drawn to centers where employment opportunities are widely available. The developmental trajectory of any given urban node can then be described in terms of a spiral of interdependencies in which capital and labor continually exert an attractive force on one another in round after round.

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round of path-dependent cumulative causation, intensified by the emergence of localized external economies of scale and scope (Scott 2000). To be sure, these processes are intimately dependent on the expansion of final markets, and they are liable to reversal when — among other things — markets collapse.

As capitalism assumes different shapes and substantive content at different times and places, so the urban centers that it breeds reflect a corresponding series of specific substantive outcomes. The 19th century in Britain saw the rise of classical factory towns with their impoverished working-class populations. In 20th century North America, the large industrial metropolis flourished on the basis of Fordist mass production systems. The present moment of history is one in which a so-called post-Fordist (or better yet, a cognitive-cultural) capitalism has entered onto the stage in various parts of the globe, and along with it has come a new urban pattern, one that features a greatly widening gap between the upper and low tiers of the labor force. Much of productive activity today involves digital technologies and flexible organization sustaining the expansion of sectors that thrive on innovation, product diversity and the provision of personalized services. The notion of a cognitive-cultural economy refers above all to the circumstance that labor processes have come to depend more and more on intellectual and affective human assets (at both high and low levels of remuneration), and are increasingly less focused on bluntly routinized mental or manual forms of work. I shall argue that in the context of these developments, we can now pinpoint in some detail the features that mark the particular version of capitalism and urbanization that has been in gestation over the past two decades. One important observation is that the consolidation of the cognitive-cultural economy in many large cities today appears to be sparking new rounds of creative activity and response, not only in the production system, but also in the wider urban environment.

The capitalist system, of course, has always been characterized by a cognitive and cultural dimension, and this has always been a source of creative and innovative forces in cities (Hall 1998). However, the substance and magnitude of these forces typically exhibit a mediated connection to the specificities of the socio-economic order; that is, they are mobilized and assume tangible content by reference to tasks and opportunities that almost always bear a controlled relationship to concrete contemporary realities. I hasten to add, knowing that this last sentence will be viewed askance in certain quarters, that I am not proposing to reinstate some sort of hard-edged structuralism here, but neither am I willing to indulge in the vacuities of a purely voluntaristic conception of social life. Different imaginaries are possible in relation to any given social substrate and - this is the point - can be harnessed in the service of political action directed to social change (cf. Jessop 2004). Today, a very distinctive cognitive-cultural substrate is making great headway in the countries of advanced capitalism, and parallel to this development, a specific and pervasive set of social energies is also coming into play. One of the potent imaginaries that has appeared in the attempt to make sense of and to naturalize this emerging situation is articulated in the work of Florida (2002, 2004) in what he refers to as the “creative class” and the “creative city.” In this article, I propose that an alternative way of approaching the issues raised by Florida can be forged on the basis of the more encompassing idea of
cognitive-cultural capitalism and its manifestation in a unique and many-sided pattern of urban development.

The Cognitive-Cultural Dimensions of Production and Work in Contemporary Capitalism

Any concrete expression of capitalist economic order can typically be described in the first instance by reference to 1.) its leading sectors, 2.) its technological foundations, 3.) its characteristic forms of labor relations, and 4.) the competitive practices that it unleashes (cf. Boyer 1986). Each of these activity systems is manifest in unique ways in the emerging cognitive-cultural version of capitalism.

First, much of the contemporary economy is driven by key sectors such as technology-intensive manufacturing, services of all varieties (business, financial, personal), fashion-oriented neo-artisanal production, and cultural-products industries (including media). These sectors by no means account for the totality of the capitalist production system at the present time, but they are assuredly at the leading edges of growth and innovation in the most economically advanced countries. Second, and notwithstanding the evident heterogeneity of these sectors, they have all been deeply penetrated by digital technologies that have in turn facilitated the widespread deroutinization of labor processes and the destandardization of outputs. Third, employment relations have been subject to radical flexibilization and destabilization, thereby injecting high levels of precariousness into labor markets for workers at all levels of skill and human capital formation. Fourth, there has been a marked intensification of competition (reinforced by globalization) in all spheres of the economy, though much of this competition occurs in modified Chamberlinian form because products with high quotients of cognitive-cultural content often possess quasi-monopoly features that make them imperfect substitutes for one another and hence susceptible to niche marketing strategies.

As these trends have moved forward, the old white-collar/blue-collar principle of productive organization and labor-market stratification so characteristic of classical Fordism has also been deeply modified. On the one hand as Autor et al. (2003) and Levy and Murnane (2004) have argued, the advent of computerization has meant that many of the routine functions that were integral to the work of both the old white-collar fraction (e.g. accounting, records management, calculating, information sorting and so on) and the old blue-collar fraction (primarily repetitive manual operations) are rapidly being automated. On the other hand, this same trend has been associated with the formation of a new (core) labor-force elite whose work is concentrated primarily on high-level problem-solving tasks, and a new (peripheral) proletarian fraction that is increasingly called upon to function as a source of flexible labor in jobs such as machine operation (driving a vehicle), materials handling (small-batch assembly of variable components), security functions, cleaning and childcare. These jobs involve significant degrees of physical engagement and call for much less in the way of formal qualifications and training than jobs in the upper tier, but even they are imbued with varieties of meaningful cognitive-cultural content.
The upper tier of the labor force of the cognitive-cultural production system can be identified in terms of broad occupational categories such as managers, professional workers, business and financial analysts, scientific researchers, technicians, skilled craftworkers, designers, artists. These are occupations that require significant levels of human capital, and they are generally well paid, though not invariably so (McRobbie 2004). To begin with, managerial and allied workers carry out the functions of administration, monitoring and control of the production system as a whole. Second, skilled analysts and other professionals are needed to maintain the specialized business and financial operations of modern capitalism. Third, scientific and technical workers are employed in large numbers to supervise the underlying technological infrastructure of the cognitive-cultural economy as well as to satisfy its unquenchable thirst for high levels of innovation. Fourth, many of the most dynamic sectors of the cognitive-cultural economy are characterized by a strong service element requiring human intermediation at the producer-consumer interface, and calling for skilled manipulation of affective-behavioral capabilities on the supply side. Fifth, workers with well-honed artistic and intellectual sensibilities make up an increasingly important part of the labor force because contemporary capitalism is also the site of a remarkable efflorescence of cultural-products industries in the broadest sense (i.e., industries with products that are permeated with some degree of aesthetic and semiotic content, and where such matters as fashion, meaning, look and feel significantly shape consumers' choices). In each of these types of employment, heavy doses of the human touch are required for the purposes of management, research, information gathering and synthesis, communication, inter-personal exchange, design, the infusion of sentiment, feeling and symbolic content into final products. The elite labor force that sustains these functions is expanding rapidly, especially in major metropolitan areas.

Alongside this upper tier of workers there exists a lower tier employed in a thick stratum of manual production activities that are not as well paid and much less gratifying in their psychic rewards. I am referring here both to the workshop and factory operations that underlie much of the cognitive-cultural economy today (as in many high-technology and neo-artisanal sectors), as well as to low-grade jobs in services such as janitorial and custodial work, facilities maintenance, unskilled hotel and restaurant trades. Additionally, a significant informal employment niche is sustained by the demands of more highly paid workers for domestic labor to perform tasks such as house cleaning, repair work, gardening and childcare. This extended underbelly of the cognitive-cultural economy is notorious for its sweatshop operations and frequent brushes with illegality in regard to labor laws. In the more advanced countries, a high proportion of the labor force in this segment is made up of immigrants (many of them undocumented) from developing parts of the world. Large numbers of these immigrants form a polyglot underclass with a marginal social and political presence in their host environments.

The gap between the average incomes of these two strata of the workforce identified in the previous paragraphs has been growing apace in the United
States over the last decade or so (Autor et al. 2006; Morris and Western 1999; Yun 2006). Both, too, are subject to much labor-market instability. Workers of all types face increasingly frequent bouts of unemployment, and are more and more likely to be caught up in temporary, part-time, and freelance modes of labor. Along with these shifts in the structure of the employment relation has gone what some analysts identify as a declining sense of allegiance among workers to any single employer (Beck 2000). To be sure, the capacities of each of these groups for dealing with these predicaments differ dramatically. While social networks are a major source of labor market information for both groups, individuals in the upper stratum usually command resources in terms of contacts and interpersonal know-how that allow them a far greater range of maneuver. In contemporary society, it is not uncommon to come across cognitive-cultural workers who have carried networking to a something like a fine art, or more accurately, perhaps, a semi-routinized habit of life in which they devote considerable amounts of time to socializing with fellow workers and exchanging information with one another about job opportunities and the state of the labor market. Reputation is a key item of currency in these fluid employment conditions, and is a major factor lubricating the progress of upper-stratum workers through the employment system. An essential strategy deployed by many individuals in this stratum involves the accumulation of personal portfolios of employment experiences demonstrating the depth and diversity of their career paths and creative accomplishments hitherto (Neff et al. 2005). For these workers, too, elaborate self-management of careers replaces the bureaucratized personnel functions of the traditional corporation.

The Cognitive-Cultural Economy and the Metropolis

As this new economic order grew over the past couple of decades, it found fertile ground in large metropolitan areas such as New York, Los Angeles, London, Paris, Amsterdam and Tokyo (cf. Sassen 1994). These are the flagship hubs of the new economy, and the primary nerve centers of a cognitive-cultural production system increasingly geared to markets that extend across the entire globe.

Cognitive-cultural production activities, then, are typically concentrated in dense locational clusters, yet their market reach frequently extends to the far corners of the world. Two analytical lines of attack help to clarify this apparently paradoxical state of affairs. In the first place, producers in cognitive-cultural sectors of the economy have a definite proclivity to agglomerate together in geographic space by reason of the external economies of scale and scope (or increasing-returns effects) that flow from selected aspects of their joint operation in particular localities. The role of flexible inter-firm networks, local labor markets and localized learning processes is especially critical here (Cooke and Morgan 1998; Scott 2000; Storper 1997). Groups of producers with strong interdependencies in regard to these variables have a powerful inducement to gravitate toward their common center gravity, thereby reducing the space-time costs of their traded and untraded transactional relations and enhancing the total stock of jointly-generated external economies. Even though it is true that low
transactions costs make it possible for certain kinds of firms to dispense with the advantages of agglomeration and to decentralize to low-cost locations, the same phenomenon also permits many other kinds of producers to enjoy the best of both worlds (to remain anchored within a specific cluster and to continue to appropriate localized competitive advantages while simultaneously contesting global markets). As the market range of producers in any given cluster increases, moreover, local economic growth accelerates, leading to the deepening of localized increasing-returns effects and the intensification of agglomeration. The signs of this developmental dynamic are palpable in the world’s great metropolitan areas today, both in the rapidly growing incidence of cognitive-cultural sectors and in the frequent expression of this growth in the formation of intra-urban industrial districts devoted to specialized facets of cognitive-cultural production (Arai et al. 2004; Currid 2006; Pratt 1997; Rantisi 2004; Schoales 2006). Classical examples of such developments are high-technology and software production in the San Francisco Bay Area, the entertainment industry in and around Hollywood, the business and financial centers of New York and London, and the fashion worlds of Paris and Milan.

Along with the widespread growth of cognitive-cultural production systems in the modern city have come numerous parallel transformations of intra-urban space, including significant enhancements of the form and function of privileged parts of the urban fabric. Among the most symptomatic expressions of this trend is a general process of social and economic upgrading in downtown areas and surrounding inner city areas. This process is widely referred to in the literature as “gentrification,” (Smith 2002; Zukin 1982) though the concept originally referred to incursions of middle-class households into decaying inner city neighborhoods. What is at stake in this regard nowadays is nothing less than radical transformations of extensive tracts of urban space by a four-fold logic of cognitive-cultural economic development, social transformation, attendant functional changes and the re-imaging of the environment by means of dramatic new symbologies.

An increasingly common manifestation of this process is the recycling and upgrading of old industrial and commercial zones of the city to provide new spaces able to accommodate high-level production and consumption activities. Harbor Front in Baltimore, Docklands in London and the Zurich West development are outstanding examples of this phenomenon. Similar kinds of initiatives can be found in Britain in Manchester’s Northern Quarter and Sheffield’s Cultural Industries Quarter with their aspirations to develop as dynamic hubs for small creative enterprises such as recording companies, electronic media labs, fashion design studios, and so on. In Los Angeles, a new Fashion District just to the south of the central business district has recently been created in what was originally a dispiriting cluster of grimy clothing factories. This development, with its renovated buildings and colorful street scenes, expresses the rising status of the Los Angeles clothing industry as a global center of designer fashions, and helps to sustain the new-found ambitions of many local producers to compete in high-end markets (Scott 2002). In similar initiatives, local authorities in cities
all over the world are engaged in projects that involve the conversion of derelict facilities to serve a diversity of cultural purposes, as in the case of Amsterdam's Westergasfabriek or parts of the Ruhr region of Germany where efforts to rebuild decaying industrial landscapes are aggressively under way.

A related and increasingly spectacular case of the recycling of urban space can be observed in the construction of large-scale architectural set pieces, functioning as iconic expressions of local economic and cultural aspirations in an age of cognitive-cultural capitalism. The grand projects set on foot by President François Mitterand in Paris in the 1980s represent one of the pioneering and certainly one of the most determined examples of this kind of ambition, and have done much to add to the already celebrated reputation of Paris as the city of spectacle and a global cultural reference point. Other illustrative cases of urban re-imaging projects in pursuit of economic and cultural status are the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Toronto’s Harbourfront and the Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur. These projects register a presence on the global stage while generating prestige and cachet that spill over into the wider urban communities in which they are located. Urban elites in all parts of the world are increasingly committed to the pursuit of projects like these in attempts to assert the visibility of their cities as foci of cultural interest and economic promise in the new global order.

As these changes have occurred, large swaths of low-income neighborhoods in central city areas have been subjected to appropriation and recolonization by the affluent. This process is expressed both in the renovation of old working-class residential properties and derelict slums, and in wholesale land clearances to accommodate new blocks of expensive condominiums. Gentrification in this sense has been going on in American cities for decades, but it has accelerated greatly in recent years as a result of changing structural conditions in the urban environment and changing priorities in residential preferences. In particular, as jobs in traditional manufacturing and wholesaling activities declined in inner urban areas, much of the old working-class population in adjacent neighborhoods migrated to other parts of the city. Correspondingly, job opportunities for cognitive-cultural workers in and around the central business districts of large cities have mushroomed of late years, and many of these workers are assuming residence in nearby neighborhoods to reduce commuting times and gain access to shopping, leisure and cultural facilities in the city. Very often, the first sign that a dilapidated section of the inner city is destined to go through this sort of transition is the irruption of groups of artists and bohemians in the area and the blossoming of studios, cafés, clubs and so on, serving their needs (Zukin 1982). Indeed, some analysts have accorded these groups, along with gays, a special status as key harbingers and tracking molecules of the “creative city” syndrome (Florida 2004; Lloyd 2002; Lloyd and Clark 2001). The overt presence in the urban landscape of such groups is said to symptomatize a state of openness and tolerance in local society, qualities that are thought, in turn, to be essential for the blooming of a creative environment. As such, the presence or absence of these groups in the city is taken by some commentators to represent a sort of litmus test of local prospects for general “creativity.”
There are numerous signs, then, of important shifts in the functions and form of the city as the cognitive-cultural foundations of modern capitalism have deepened and widened. These shifts are detectable in the economic patterns, social organization and physical structure of many different cities. Specialized areas of the city dedicated to entertainment, recreation, edification and shopping have also undergone much elaboration and embellishment as individuals with high levels of cognitive and cultural capital – not to mention pecuniary capital – have become a more insistent component of contemporary urban life (Zukin 1995). In these ways, a new kind of balance and integration seems to be emerging at least in privileged sections of modern cities between economy and society, between production and consumption, between work and leisure, and between commerce and culture. A dark shadow is nonetheless cast over this gratifying picture both by the swelling underbelly of low-wage industrial and service functions that are invariably to be found in large metropolitan areas where cognitive-cultural economic functions are most highly developed, and by the often problem-ridden residential areas that are the sources of the labor needed to maintain these functions.

The deepening pall cast by this condition of social and economic inequality almost certainly puts shackles on the potential of the city for creative performance and on its capacity to promote consistently high levels of social learning, economic innovation and human conviviality. Large segments of the urban population face serious impediments to participation as full-blown citizens in daily life and work, a circumstance that generates high costs to the individuals directly concerned and – via the multiple negative externalities that result from this situation – to urban society as a whole. The problems of a divided and unequal citizenry are compounded by the fact that many of the most underprivileged groups in large metropolitan areas today consist of immigrants from poor countries drawn into the orbit of the urban economy by the low-wage employment opportunities that proliferate in these areas. In many cases, these immigrants form polyethnic and polylingual neighborhoods within the social space of the metropolis, thereby exacerbating the social separation and isolation that constantly work against the formation of a wider sense of community. The relentless withdrawal of public services that is occurring in the context of the neoliberal political climate prevailing in many of the more advanced capitalist countries at the present time only serves to intensify the possessive individualism characteristic of so much of modern urban life at the expense of communal values. Equally, as globalization runs its course, extended geographic echoes of these same predicaments become ever louder. On the one hand, new expressions of formal organic solidarity via the division of labor are taking shape on a global scale as increasingly large volumes of low-wage work are transferred from the more economically advanced countries to diverse locations in the developing world. On the other hand, this trend is proceeding without the concomitant inconveniences of propinquity to more privileged social strata in the developed world, so responsibility or accountability by individuals in the upper strata in regard to individuals in lower strata is apt to be further diminished.
Cognitive-Cultural Workers and the Constitution of Urban Life

Over the past few decades, many social scientists have attempted to describe the changing stratification of capitalist society and to typify the shifts that have been occurring in social structure since the heyday of the classical white-collar/blue-collar division that prevailed in American cities over much of the 20th century. In a pioneering statement, Bell (1973) alluded to the advent of what he called post-industrial society, and he suggested that the old social divisions of capitalism were in fact being transcended by a new-found drive for personal fulfillment and self-realization in a service-oriented economy. Gouldner (1979) offers us the idea of a “new class” made up of individuals who have internalized an ideology of critical rationality; for them, reasoned arguments take precedence over hierarchical authority as a basis for belief and action. The modern technocrat is the emblematic figure of this new class. Reich (1992), in turn, refers to “symbolic workers” who constitute, he claims, the elite of an emerging information society. Sklair (2000) broadens the picture with the concept of a “transnational capitalist class” composed of managers, professionals and technicians who are engaged in forms of work that express and promote the historical project of globalization. Most recently of all, Florida (2002) has advanced the argument that a new “creative class,” comprising all those workers engaged in one form or another of thought-intensive work, has come into being in American society.

Each of these attempts to say something about the changing organization of society in contemporary capitalism unquestionably has something of interest and significance to convey, though none is entirely satisfactory. The term “class,” is perhaps unduly forceful a word to use for some of these rather nebulous social groupings, especially in view of its more orthodox connotation of two opposing strata whose interests clash as a consequence of their structured relations to the means of production and their opposing claims on the economic surplus. Additionally, as Markusen (2006) has argued, Florida’s proposed creative class is something of an incoherent concept, for it assembles a wide assortment of very disparately situated individuals – from company executives to software programmers and from international financiers to artists – within its rather elastic boundaries. This assortment does not even look much like the relatively diluted Weberian idea of class with its emphasis on occupation and relative life chances. Still more problematical is the way in which Florida invests those individuals who compose the more privileged segments of capitalist society with a sort of ontological capacity for “creativity,” a characterization that carries with it an overload of exhilarating implications, but that is also rather threadbare in terms of its concrete meaning. In reality, the distinctive forms of human capital that these individuals possess – specifically the cognitive and cultural tasks they are called on to perform in their work – are, for the most part, wedged in social grooves and infused with very specific substance. Within the framework of contemporary capitalism, these tasks are focused on activities including neoliberal technomangement, innovation-oriented process and product design, the personalized provision of services, the naturalization of socially-useful aptitudes and beliefs (in educational institutions and the media, for example), and the commercialization of experiences, cultural encounters and leisure pursuits. Special mention needs
to be made in this context of the enormous recent expansion of cultural-products industries generally and the concomitant emergence of an important segment of the cognitive-cultural labor force dedicated to the conception and fabrication of outputs whose function is to entertain, to instruct, to embellish and to reinforce identity (Bourdieu 1979; Hesmondhalgh 2002; Power and Scott 2004). This is a world, as Lash and Urry (1994) have shown, in which culture is produced increasingly in commodity form, while commodity production itself becomes ever more deeply infused with aesthetic and semiotic meaning. The steady convergence of the economic and the cultural in contemporary capitalism has led some postmodern theorists to claim – no doubt correctly – that the sphere of culture today is endemically subject to a condition of waning symbolic intensity and rising ephemerality (cf. Jameson 1992).

Various intimations of the logic and meaning of the new social forces and alignments that are rising to the fore in capitalist society are now a common feature of journalistic accounts of current economic and urban realities. Among the more prominent of these effusions on the new economy is a stream of managerial theories and advice directed to the personal and affective qualities required to bring order and dynamism into the cognitive-cultural workplace. The normative discourse of management analysts and consultants today is considerably less concerned than it once was with down-to-earth issues of efficiency and control, and much more focused on methods of cultivating human resources including leadership, empathy, self-motivation, adaptability, inventiveness, resourcefulness and ethical consciousness in a fast-moving, high-risk business environment (Boltanski and Chiapello 1999; Thrift 2005). There is incontestably much in this discourse that is helpful to managers and workers trying to find some sort of strategic purchase on the day-to-day problems they face in the new cognitive-cultural economic environment, though it is distinctly less useful as a guide to the formulation of critical insights or as a basis for the construction of sensible and politically plausible imaginaries about alternative possibilities. Various echoes of this discourse resonate in the currently fashionable creed of the creative city, with its upbeat message about the transformation of urban areas by means of programs designed to draw in members of the “creative class” who will then, presumably, express their talents and energies in ways that result in multiple local economic and cultural benefits (Florida 2004; Landry 2000). Once more, we can find elements in the analysis that merit our attention, even if in its raw form it greatly oversimplifies the policy challenges that need to be addressed in any economic development program (nowhere more so than in regard to the construction of employment opportunities), and obscures the historically-specific function and meaning of intellectual and symbolic labor in contemporary capitalism. At the same time, it is perhaps worth reflecting that this same creed tends to display an exaggeratedly optimistic faith in the benign social and political impacts of the so-called creative class, if only by reason of its pregnant silences about the deepening social divide in the cities of advanced capitalism today and its signal failure to call into question any of the more regressive aspects of the contemporary cultural scene wrought by this fraction of the labor force. That said, in Florida’s more recent work, 2005, he makes a start on rectifying some
of these lacunae by acknowledging the links between the new economy and economic inequality.

The less prepossessing features of the cognitive-cultural economy are amplified by the added problem of rapidly rising levels of social instability and risk, so that all strata – even the urban elite – are subject to an intensification of the general precariousness of life (Beck 2000). Individual members of the labor force exert considerable energy and time in navigating pathways through the reefs and shoals of practical social existence whether by means of very self-conscious social networking on the part of upper-tier workers (Batt et al. 2001; Neff et al. 2005; Ursell 2000) or via diverse ethnic and extended-family ties on the part of the lower tier (Sanders et al. 2002; Waldinger 2001). Many kinds of cognitive-cultural workers – especially in the early stages of their careers – are inveterate joiners of work-related social groups, and they are prone to spend large amounts of time outside their normal working hours in building relationships with allied workers so as to maintain their labor market edge (cf. Scott 2000). In these conditions, human interaction is apt to take on discernible utilitarian undertones. Thus, in a study of workers in the television industry Ursell (2000) has shown how an “economy of favors” has arisen in which information about job opportunities and work-related matters is exchanged on an informal *quid pro quo* basis through extended webs of social contacts. At the same time, the kaleidoscope of shifting opportunities and setbacks that characterize much of the cognitive-cultural economy today is increasingly reflected in careers that unfold across many different employers in many different places, and often – especially for upper-tier workers – in many different countries. In this manner, the traditional connection between propinquity and community is subject to further decay, just as a growing ethos of interpersonal engagement without durable commitment becomes a normalized condition of urban existence. The same instability and insecurity provide a strong incentive for members of the upper-tier of the labor force to engage in persistent self-promotion and self-publicity, an incentive that no doubt is magnified the more they are possessed of a portfolio of experiences and qualifications that mark them out as the bearers of a unique package of attributes and talents. In testimony to the above remarks, Sennett (1998) has pointed to an apparent corrosion of traditional forms of affectivity and trust in both the workplace and social life, while Putnam (2000) has written more generally about the weakening of communal ties in America.

It is tempting to attribute at least some of the narcissism that was thought by Lasch (1978) to be on the rise in the American psyche to social forces and predicaments of these types. A less ambitious way of making much the same point is to appeal to the accumulating evidence of the expansion of the sphere of the private and the personal and a corresponding contraction of the public sphere in American cities. Quite apart from the condition of public penury and a broadly decaying sense of community, as already invoked, we can see the immediate effects of this state of affairs in the intense fragmentation of the social space of the contemporary metropolis. The very social diversity that is so often celebrated as one of the main conditions of a creative urban environment today is actually inscribed on the landscape of the metropolis in patterns of separation and
detachment, accentuated by the striking marginalization of the ever-expanding immigrant population of the city. For many immigrants, this situation is manifest in relative and absolute poverty as well as in political disenfranchisement. The fact that so many of these denizens of American cities in the early 21st century have curtailed entitlements and restricted channels for the democratic expression of their political aspirations means not only that they are denied full incorporation into urban society, but also that they have limited incentives to make durable commitments to the community at large. The net result is further deterioration of the capacity of the urban system for releasing and mobilizing the creative potential of the citizenry. Perhaps one of the most symptomatic expressions of the inhospitable character of the city of social extremes as found in contemporary America is the proliferation of gated neighborhoods with their transformation of important sections of urban space into zones of explicit exclusion (Blakely and Snyder 1999). This phenomenon represents a direct incursion on the democratic use of urban space and an actual and symbolic violation of the principle of common citizenship.

Beyond the Creative City

As cognitive-cultural forms of production and work penetrate more deeply into contemporary capitalist society, enormously varied bundles of urban responses have been set in motion. A set of privileged intra-metropolitan spaces supporting the work, residence and leisure activities of the new cognitive-cultural elite is now an important ingredient of many world cities. On the other side, and given that large numbers of low-wage, low-skill jobs are a major element of the cognitive-cultural economy, a growing underclass is also a major feature of the very same cities. These trends are embedded in a widening dynamic of economic-cultural integration on the global scale, leading to complex forms of urban specialization and interdependence across the global landscape.

Some of the more positive features of this picture have been highlighted in a number of normative commentaries focused on the creative potentials of contemporary cities. Policy makers and planners in many different parts of the world have understandably displayed much enthusiasm in regard to these commentaries, and in numerous cases have actually embarked on attempts to make their cities appealing to the talented and high-skill individuals who are thought, in the more prominent versions of the story, to be the primum mobile of the creative city. The idea of the creative city is all the more irresistible to policy makers in view of its promise of high-wage jobs in sectors of economic activity that are mostly environmentally friendly and promise to upgrade the urban fabric. In a number of cases, practical attempts to pursue the idea have been complemented by efforts to mount displays of architectural master strokes designed to attract the attention of potential visitors and inward investors and to establish dramatized points of reference in the global race for economic and cultural influence. Florida (2002, 2004) has been the most forthright instigator of a normative agenda like this, but his ideas find both implicit and explicit support in other work, including the “consumer city” concept as formulated by Glaeser et al. (2001), and the view of the city as an “entertainment machine” that Lloyd
and Clark (2001) have proposed. Florida's suggested strategy for building the creative city can be schematized – with only a touch of willful skepticism – in terms of three main brush strokes. First, municipal authorities are advised to encourage the development of amenities that are claimed to be valued by the creative class. Bikeways and fashionable restaurants figure prominently in the suggestions offered here (and regression analysis suggests that warm winters also help things along); movie theaters and art galleries are apparently of much less consequence. Second, Florida proposes that once appropriate packages of amenities are in place in any given city, members of the creative class will then be induced to take up residence, especially if an atmosphere of tolerance and openness also prevails. As this occurs, diverse creative energies will then presumably be released. Third, and consequently, the dynamism of the local economy can be expected to accelerate along with further upscaling of the built environment and general enhancement of the prestige-cum-attractiveness of the city as a whole.

I have criticized this approach elsewhere (Scott 2004, 2006), and reaffirm that cities are subject to path-dependent growth trajectories in which both the supply and the demand for labor move in patterns of mutually cumulative causation. The primary engine of this process is not the inward and unilateral migration of particular types of workers, but the complex apparatus of the urban production system (i.e., the network of interrelated industrial and service activities generating locationally polarized economic development). This type of developmental engine was obviously at work in earlier periods of capitalism, and it is still detectable as the major motive force of urbanization in cognitive-cultural capitalism today. Consider the case of factory towns in 19th century England. It was not the prior massing together of dense working-class populations that explains the formation of these towns, even though the presence of a working-class population is essential for a factory town to function. Equally, the growth of Silicon Valley in the second half of the 20th century is not to be accounted for by invoking the prior existence of some undifferentiated creative class in the local area, just as it would surely be absurd to claim that the driving force of the Valley's long-term expansion can be ascribed to continual incursions by members of that class in search of amenity value. On the contrary, the historic accumulation in Silicon Valley of a labor force comprising specialized semiconductor technicians, computer scientists, software and engineers is comprehensible only when we set this trend in the context of an evolving web of specialized production activities and employment opportunities tied in to ever widening final markets for semiconductors, computers and software. Yes, the supply of labor is a crucial moment in the chain of temporal intermediations through which cognitive-cultural centers of production and work evolve, but it remains a subordinate moment in the sense that the generative power of local economic development resides preeminently in the path-dependent logic of production, agglomeration, and regional specialization. By the same token, dissipation of that power is a virtually inevitable road to ruin even where large numbers of workers with high levels of human capital continue to reside in the local area. Policy makers neglect these aspects of the problem at their peril.
Beyond the analytical flaws that underlie much recent work on the creative city, an odd reticence can be detected in many of the claims advanced about the possibilities for revival of the social life and physical environment of cities by tapping into the expansionary powers of the cognitive-cultural economy. While cognitive-cultural forms of production and work offer new and dynamic possibilities for urban regeneration, it bears repeating that there is a dark side to the developmental dialectic of contemporary cities, and the deepening neoliberalism trend is exacerbating the problem. This premise raises issues about the reconstruction of urban society that go well beyond simple pleas for openness, tolerance and diversity; while these are excellent goals, they do not guarantee transcendence of social isolation, fragmentation and inequality. To the contrary, even if these qualities were universally present, the ingrained structural logic of contemporary economic and social order would still give rise to conspicuous inequities and injustices in large cities. In contrast with the neoliberal political agenda that currently holds sway in the United States, and that is endemically associated with high levels of urban poverty and deprivation, only some sort of conscientious program of social democracy with a strong focus on redistribution, decent jobs for all and the re-engagement of the citizenry in the political realm seems appropriate to address social reform. Beyond the implementation of elementary principles of social equity, justice and participatory democracy, an additional challenge looms. As cities shift into cognitive-cultural modes of economic activity, the search for meaningful forms of solidarity, sociability and mutual aid in everyday work and life becomes increasingly urgent – not just because these attributes are important in their own right – but also because they enlarge the sphere of creativity, learning, innovation, social experimentation and cultural expression and are essential for the further economic and cultural flowering of contemporary cities. It is just possible that some of the goals of this search may be realizable if, as Judis and Teixeira (2002) expect, a new and socially progressive majority begins to take shape in what they call "postindustrial" cities.

Finally, an even broader social imperative is brought to the fore as the cognitive-cultural economy continues its ascent and as the symbolic-affective content of final outputs becomes ever more pervasive. Consumption of these outputs has potent direct and indirect impacts on human consciousness and ideological orientation, and this process, by the same token, generates massive externalities for all. These externalities give rise to complex dilemmas for they reappear in various social and political guises with deep implications for modes of social being. And precisely because they are externalities, they can never be adequately processed via market rationality alone. A persistent public debate and mutual education about the personal meanings and political consequences of the consumption side of the cognitive-cultural economy – and about the possibilities of more critically informed participation – is a further prerequisite of a progressive and democratic social order in contemporary capitalism.
Note

1. There is much in this kind of analytical maneuver that recalls the obdurate tautologies of neoclassical economics. For example, if we observe a significant tendency for individuals of type x to live in proximity to attributes of type y it is said that the same individuals must have a "revealed preference" for y. Revealed preference then accounts for their presence in proximity to y. How do we know this? Because they live close to y!

References


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