

Venture Labor, Media Work, and the Communicative Construction of Economic Value: Agendas for the Field and Critical Commentary¹



Labor on the Cutting Edge

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In *Venture Labor*, we encounter resourceful and skilled groups of professionals dealing with a complex mixture of economic and noneconomic opportunity, risk, insecurity, and creative fulfillment. To navigate this shifting and fluid landscape, these professionals choose from among a set of contrasting strategies. Some of these strategies entail insecurity and risk, while others maximize opportunities for desired creative work or the chance to acquire economic wealth. In examining these strategies, *Venture Labor* unravels the mysteries of work under a form of individualizing capitalism still in its infancy.

Keywords: insecurity, free agent, new spirit of capitalism, employability

In the concept of *Venture Labor*, we see the power of contradictory forces remaking the economic landscape of 21st-century America. Neff shows us how skilled wage earners approached their work and career options in a burgeoning and new sector of the economy—technology and new media—during a time of rapid change and upheaval: New York City in the late 1990s.

Venture Labor exposes to view a world where new forms of employment and entrepreneurialism collide with an emergent form of flexible capitalism. This emergent form of capitalism increasingly marginalizes ordinary labor as part of the production and accumulation process, even as it boosts the payoffs accruing to the specialized skills of elite technical and managerial “superworkers” (Picketty, 2014). In the world of venture labor, new businesses crystallize overnight, promising huge payoffs to founders and other well-positioned individuals. At the same time, to the extent that these new workers do not

¹ This selection is part of the forum entitled *Venture Labor, Media Work, and the Communicative Construction of Economic Value: Agendas for the Field and Critical Commentary*, edited by Laura Robinson, Gina Neff, and Jeremy Schulz. All contributions and critiques to the forum should be read and cited as an interlocking dialogue created jointly by Laura Robinson, Jeremy Schulz, Alice E. Marwick, Nicole S. Cohen, C. W. Anderson, Michelle Rodino-Colocino, Enda Brophy, Gina Neff, Paul Hirsch, Sarah Banet-Weiser, Ofer Sharone, Barry Wellman, Dimitrina Dimitrova, Tsahi Hayat, Guang Ying Mo, Beverly Wellman, and Antonio Casilli.

command a special premium on the labor market and must rely on ordinary labor power (Cowen, 2013), they are haunted by the specter of long-term unemployment.

These skilled workers reveal larger trends reshaping the world of work. Workers are caught in the eddies of powerful currents pulling them in opposing directions. The professionals who populate *Venture Labor* have a front-row seat to the unraveling of the mutual compact that used to bind together employees and employers and ensured that employers would make long-term commitments to their employees (Barley & Kunda, 2004; Beck, 2000). For Neff's respondents, contingent employment poses simultaneous risks and opportunities. Although they suffer as a result of the breakdown in employee-employer allegiance, they are also in a position to exploit it.

On the one hand, these professionals cope with the everyday insecurities that afflict those who cannot count on steady paid employment. They can be cut loose at any moment for any reason by employers under no obligation to provide stable employment (Kalleberg, 2011). Some of them cannot even bank on a steady paycheck, as their employers may become insolvent and unable to meet payroll. Like other kinds of freelancers and self-employed persons, they also must expend a great deal of energy promoting themselves to potential future employers and sharpening the skills and contacts that keep them employable in their competitive industry.

On the other hand, some find ways to embrace the opportunities that go hand in hand with these insecurities. In embracing a kind of "free agency" as the solution to unemployment and underemployment (Pink, 2001), they find themselves shouldering the burdens that have traditionally been borne by the business enterprises themselves. Yet, these workers encounter coveted opportunities to exercise their talents, work on exciting projects, participate in the formation of dynamic enterprises, and potentially acquire vast wealth.

Among these professional workers, we find variation along multiple axes. At the extreme end of the continuum, the workers of *Venture Labor* chase the role of entrepreneur and even financier, looking to get a "piece of the action" by acquiring equity in new enterprises. Seduced by the lure of riches and animated by the "new spirit of capitalism" (Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999), which ties capitalistic activity to excitement and adventure, these workers seek out stakes in nascent enterprises. Many of these financial risk takers yearn to "cash out" and leave their careers as employees behind. This subgroup attempts to convert its human capital, energy, and time into financial capital to join the ranks of the capital owners. These individuals situate their authentic work life in the hypothetical future (Hochschild, 1997), looking over the horizon to a time when they can exit the world of insecure employment.

Another notable subgroup, the more creative risk takers, eschews the financially oriented game played by these hopeful capitalists. Instead, they find their satisfaction in the here and now, leaping from one intrinsically interesting project to another. Adopting the career and work perspective of artists, who trade security and stability for meaningful and enriching work, these men and women try to remake work into leisure, internalizing paid work within the realm of leisure and lifestyle (Gorz, 1999). But these workers must accept their economic insecurity as the price they pay for doing what they enjoy, rather than a good in itself.

A third solution to the predicaments faced by all of these workers is exemplified by the last subgroup, the employment entrepreneurs. Rather than retreating from commodity-producing labor or making a bid to become capitalists, these employment entrepreneurs attempt to optimize themselves as "superemployees," able to best the competition in a saturated labor market. Because they boast skills and experience that any prospective employer finds irresistible, they can perpetually look for new jobs. Ideally, they can make themselves independent of any one employer and pursue their own economic interests over the long term. More than the other two types, these employment entrepreneurs treat their own stock of skills and experience as akin to an investment "portfolio" with future value that can be maximized strategically (Davis 2009). Like investors who compare investment vehicles in terms of their financial returns, these workers compare various job opportunities in terms of the returns on their expenditures of time and energy. Looking at job opportunities as means of enhancing employability, this subgroup takes the logic of employment to an extreme rather than transcending it.

In this vivid and arresting portrait of work and career at the leading edge of a dynamic 21st century industry, we see how particularly resourceful and skilled groups of workers grapple with a complex mixture of economic and noneconomic opportunity, risk, and insecurity. As *Venture Labor* so insightfully shows, across the various subgroups, successfully navigating this complex landscape of conflicting imperatives means adopting and shedding a broad array of different roles and positions, including worker, entrepreneur, artist, and actuary. This broad repertoire of roles and positions is a necessity for those who wish to survive and thrive in the dynamic corners of a capitalist system that increasingly treats mere labor power as valueless.

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