



Monetising Amateurs Artistic Critique, New Online Record Production and Neoliberal Conjuncture

By
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Abstract

This article examines an emerging academic discourse of new online record production. It represents amateur musicians and producers—with access to new digital production and communication tools—as entrepreneurial, aspiring professionals. The article then connects the discourse with its political, economic, and social context—or the neoliberal conjuncture. From the critical standpoint of conjunctural analysis it takes note of the albeit uneven nature of this neoliberalisation when it comes to certain cultural formations such as the “underground”, “do-it-yourself” and “independent micro-label” music scenes, who are considered to be maintaining “the artistic critique of capitalism”, as outlined by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello. While the latter suggest that this critique has been, for all intents and purposes, assimilated into capitalism; the case of underground and independent micro-label scenes would seem to repudiate the prevailing neoliberal notions of utilitarian music-making in the new online record production framework. This being said, the article does consider that it might be necessary to revise aspects of the artistic critique rehearsed in music scenes such as the aforementioned for it to remain relevant in the new digital communication environment.

Keywords: New music economy, conjunctural analysis, micro-labels, artistic critique, neoliberalism.

Juho Tuomas Kaitajärvi-Tiekso: “Monetising Amateurs: Artistic Critique, New Online Record Production and Neoliberal Conjuncture”, *Culture Unbound*, Volume 12, Issue 2, 2020: 412–435. Published by Linköping University Electronic Press: <http://www.cultureunbound.ep.liu.se>

Introduction

Information technology has permeated many aspects of life in the twenty-first century—especially in the production of recorded music. While digital recording and sound processing software have made so-called do-it-yourself production commonplace since the 1990s (Burgess 2014), the internet has, in turn, facilitated networking and music distribution for amateur musicians and record producers (Strachan 2007). In the realm of music, the shift to digital production has been dubbed the “new music economy” (Wikström 2009), or “Music 2.0” (Collins & Young 2014) as an elaboration of the idea of “Web 2.0”.¹ In another study on the proliferation of amateur music production in the digital era, Nick Prior (2010) also speaks of “new amateurs” (cf. Hearn et al. 2004). These studies celebrate a phenomenon where new, “undiscovered” talents are seen as now being capable of reaching success by producing and distributing recordings of a “professional” quality and promoting them at the grassroots level across the internet via, for example, social media. At the same time, there is also a fast-growing body of non-fiction music industry guides and ‘how to..’ books that are contributing to this discourse (see Haynes & Marshall 2017b).

This article focuses on the production, distribution, and promotion of recordings despite live music being an important source of revenue for artists, which is increasingly the case in the “new music economy” (Wikström 2009, 137–40).² However, record production in a broad sense arguably epitomises the technological changes within the industries.³ While the shift to digital production and distribution has been comprehensively documented by music industry scholars, the study of music’s relationship with neoliberalism remains somewhat neglected, especially when it comes to amateurism and record production (see Graham 2013; León 2014; Taylor 2016: 1–19; Hesmondhalgh & Meier 2015). This article aims to analyse this technological shift in music production in relation to the political, social, and economic realm that surrounds it (cf. Graham 2013). It examines an optimistic discourse that consists of academic as well as various professional and journalistic accounts of the new record production possibilities provided to amateurs by online tools (Collins & Young 2014; Wikström 2009; Baym 2011, 2018; Prior 2010, 2014; Kelly 2008; Bruenger 2016; Anderson 2014; Hracs 2012; Hearn et al. 2004; Mulligan 2017). The study contextualises the celebration of amateurs reaching (a degree of) professionalism with the current neoliberal conjuncture. The article examines how, in this context, the discourse of online record production framework constructs an idealised entrepreneurial subject of the amateur as a type of aspiring professional. New digital technology facilitates an amateur’s development into a music entrepreneur, while the whole process is naturalised in their reductive presentation in the discourse.

It is assumed that neoliberalism is largely responsible for shaping the current conjuncture, despite the growth of right-wing populism and authoritarian politics across Europe and the US (Konings 2018; cf. Davis 2016). A growing number of scholars from a wide range of academic fields, such as cultural studies and other social and political sciences, have recently been scrutinising neoliberalism from a number of perspectives ranging from treating it as an economic, political, or cultural reality, to analysing it as a full-blown political theory, an ideology, or a “governmental” technique (Boltanski & Chiapello 2005; Bourdieu 1998; Fornäs 2014; Foucault 2008; Harvey 2005; Jones 2014; Ong 2006 etc.). Others have criticised how the concept has been deployed (Clarke 2008; Ryan 2015; Skeggs 2014; Wacquant 2012), while some have focused on neoliberalism at the individual level, namely as an individualistic, entrepreneurial, and competitive view of the self (Lazzarato 2012: 90–95, 2015: 108; Davies 2014). My scholarly interests intersect with these studies here, in so far as I am examining neoliberal subjectivity specifically in contemporary accounts of amateur music producers.

Accompanying the growing prevalence of neoliberalism as a concept in academia, there has been a corresponding body of sharp and well-argued criticism of how the term is sometimes carelessly used. John Clarke (2010; see Lehtonen 2016) claims that many studies on neoliberalism conflate various economic, political, and cultural developments with an anti-historical “epoch”. Some studies, meanwhile, emphasise the distinction between theoretical and actual neoliberalism (Ryan 2015; Wacquant 2012; see Clarke 2014). I therefore turn to conjunctural analysis (Clarke 2010; Lehtonen 2016) to circumvent the pitfalls associated with neoliberalism. Examining the concept in conjunctural terms means contextualising it within an assemblage of various overlapping and perhaps contradictory tendencies (Clarke 2010; Lehtonen 2016). From this perspective, I examine how “actual” neoliberalism exists (if at all) in conjunction with the discourses of amateurism among record producers.

The image of amateurs as purely entrepreneurial subjects may well dominate the discourse in academia and popular science, but not when we look holistically at the conjuncture. There are idealistic small-scale artists and producers, sometimes described as “independent” (Hesmondhalgh & Meier 2015; Strachan 2003), “underground” (Graham 2016), or ‘DIY’ as in do-it-yourself (Strachan 2003; 2007; Bennett & Guerra 2018; Kaitajärvi-Tiekso 2018)—as well as amateurs that are simply content in their small circles (Prior 2018; Finnegan 1989)—that paint an alternative picture of amateurs to the ‘upwardly mobile’ one highlighted in the above discourse. These grassroots artists or producers claim to be content in producing marginal music for small audiences and suggest that there is a purposefully inefficient component to being a true amateur. I interpret this as an artistic critique of capitalism, as outlined by Boltanski & Chiapello (2005). While

these ‘music non-professionals’ do not overtly spurn popularity, they claim to be disinterested, or at least selective, in choosing the ways in which to achieve it—concentrating only on activities considered to be meaningful by their own small scenes. Nevertheless, even these subversive activities are not immune to changes in the conjuncture—that is their social, political, legal, technological, and economic contexts—yet, at the same time, they show ways in which neoliberalism can be challenged and criticised.

Neoliberalism within the Conjuncture

As critics suggest, neoliberalism is used to describe very diverse political formations and their theoretical concepts (e.g. Clarke 2008; Wacquant 2012). The sociologist William Davies (2014) argues that the diffuse nature of neoliberalism lies in the ability of what it describes to readily assimilate with different situations. Similarly, Boltanski & Chiapello (2005) note how capitalism develops immunity to its critics by subsuming them within itself.

To avoid the criticisms levelled at previous studies of neoliberalism—especially reductionism—a few clarifications are justified. First, it is appropriate to distinguish *actually existing neoliberalism* (Wacquant 2012; Davies 2014: 26, 29, 77, 89; Plehwe & Mills 2012; cf. Ryan 2015) from neoliberal economic theory. Furthermore, any analysis of neoliberalism should view it from within the conjuncture. Conjunctural analysis allows us to identify not only the places where neoliberalism *has* influenced amateur cultural production, but also the nooks and crannies where it *has not*—in other words, the contradictory features that escape the oversimplifications of epochal analysis (Clarke 2010; Lehtonen 2016; Williams 1977). Conjunctural analysis looks at neoliberalism as a complex, dynamic process that describes a range of spatiotemporal developments—not just economic as is often assumed (Clarke 2010). These can be political, social, ideological, technological, cultural, and so on, and may involve directions that contradict each other. Additionally, the dominant tendencies—the epoch—are in constant negotiation with the residual and emergent elements they preside over (Williams 1977). These notions must be taken into an account when analysing neoliberal subjects and assessing the alleged consequences of neoliberalism such as economic inequality and the impoverishment of cultural and social values.

The Artistic Critique of *Homo Oeconomicus* and the Neoliberal Self

According to Foucault (2008), neoliberal economics provide a scheme by which all human action—social, political, etc.—can be rationalised and modelled (see Davies 2014; for a recent critique of the theory, see also Lazzarato 2015: 91–175). This resonates strongly with the turn towards economics taken in cultural studies, in which Lawrence Grossberg (2010), for instance, argues that “economics is too important to be left to economists”. The idea is that we should not treat the economy as somehow separate from social relationships, but include it in cultural analyses (see Clarke 2008; 2014).⁴ Interestingly, during the second half of the twentieth century, while economists were isolating their field to become only intelligible to themselves, economics was being applied to wider questions such as the organisation of human life and society, and (especially noteworthy in the present context) cultural production (Davies 2014: 20–8, 84–7). These are all themes that have been studied from quite different angles in the humanities and the political and social sciences. I thus seek to understand neoliberalism less as a circumscribed ideology than as a mode of economic and governmental discourse that influences cultural production and the very fabric of society (cf. Foucault 2008: 218). From the perspective of this article it is worth noting that Foucault (2008: 226) argues that the entrepreneurial subject is central to neoliberalism. American neoliberal theory has shifted Adam Smith’s original definition of *homo oeconomicus* so that “the entrepreneur” is now its living embodiment, “being for himself the source of [his] earnings” (ibid.).⁵ According to Jim McGuigan (2014), the neoliberal self has recently taken the form of a “successful entrepreneur”, preferably in the “creative industries”—a popular image that nevertheless ignores its precarious flip side. Similarly, Maurizio Lazzarato (2012: 8–9, 49–52; 2015: 14–6) claims that neoliberalism has failed in its emancipatory promises to entrepreneurs by leaving them in debt and financial precarity. Elaborating on Foucault, he goes on to argue that the production of subjectivities in current hegemony of financial capitalism also encourages a lack of values other than in the capitalist sense (Lazzarato 2015: 143–5).

Regarding the field of music, Timothy D. Taylor (2016: 44–79) claims that the most remarkable effect of neoliberalism has been to increasingly commodify music in terms of branding. Taylor demonstrates how musical careers increasingly take the form of entrepreneurship, where musical values are translated into economic ones (see also Tessler 2016). Artists’ careers are often accompanied and built up through branding, where they use either sponsored services such as record labels established by famous brands, or their own popularity to market non-music products or acquire new sponsors. Successful artists may also be cobranded with various corporate trademarks in a strategy where both brands seek to reinforce

each other and develop their markets and image. Hesmondhalgh & Meier (2015) note how even “[m]any independent and unsigned artists interested in retaining ownership of their copyrights have turned to a different set of companies in their quest for funding and marketing exposure: advertisers and brands”. This sector that aspires to stay away from the major music corporations has also had to embrace entrepreneurial practices such as self-promoting and crowdfunding to sustain a career in the midst of growing competition (*ibid.*).

This study thus focuses mainly on the discussion of values in neoliberalism by a few scholars. First, Davies (2014) argues that—having been influenced by the so-called Chicago school towards the end of the 20th century—neoliberalism privileges calculable, positivist, and empirical economics, because it is the ultimate evaluation of “competitive reality”. Emphasising positivist economics avoids evaluating the moral premises of neoliberalism. One of Davies’ (32, 194) key arguments is that the neoliberal mode of “quantitative economic” or “economistic” evaluation has become unquestioned and pervasive. According to him, this entails that any intrinsic values (for example, cultural values in this case), are overwhelmed by extrinsic, utilitarian values that are easier to measure. Assumptions that human beings are “rational maximisers” of their own interests further justify this positivism.

Boltanski & Chiapello (2005: 27–43), who influenced Davies, explore “the new spirit of capitalism”, i.e. the moral justification for neoliberalism, in relation to two critiques of capitalism. The first is social, where capitalism is seen to encourage inequality, selfishness, and poverty; the second is artistic, where it is seen to standardise, over-rationalise, and threaten the authenticity of artists. According to Boltanski & Chiapello (466–472), the new spirit of capitalism may have been able to successfully neutralise the artistic critique—by incorporating it in the form of flexibility, tolerance, and creativity within a networked, post-Fordist “creative economy”—but not the social critique.

As a theorist familiar with artistic practice, however, Lazzarato (2017) claims that Boltanski & Chiapello are needlessly keeping the concepts of freedom and equality mutually exclusive to their respective artistic and social critiques. As a consequence, the former is considered aristocratic, and compatible with neoliberalism, while the other is not; making this division into two critiques problematic, as any serious critique of neoliberalism needs to include both (*cf.* Gilbert 2017: xvii–xix). This “bourgeois” artistic critique versus “authentic” working-class social critique is also flagged up by Rancière (2009: 25–49), who goes on to criticise Boltanski & Chiapello (among other sociologists) for their melancholic vision of the invincible and omnipotent capitalism that simply incorporates criticism (*cf.* Skeggs 2014). While I agree that Boltanski’s and Chiapello’s juxtaposition of artistic and social critiques is somewhat contrived and

unempirical, I do think that analysing the ways that capitalism exploits criticism of itself will contribute to further improving these critiques (see also Davies 2014: 190). Boltanski & Chiapello (345–418) still consider ways of reviving artistic critique, and they argue that the social critique of capitalism remains effective; this, I believe, refutes any accusations of melancholy.

Eran Fisher's (2010) "spirit of networks" elaborates further on this concept insofar as he argues that it is precisely the flexibility of contemporary digital networks that allows the artistic critique to be neutralised. But this very same spirit of networks is also the core of the "digital discourse" that aims to legitimate and naturalise neoliberalist exploitation, a discourse that exposes the connection between technology and neoliberalism and provides a perspective that is also crucial to the present article.

Amateurs as Aspiring Professionals in the Online Record Production Framework

I have previously examined the discourse of amateurism and professionalism by so-called micro-labels in Finland (Kaitajärvi-Tiekso 2018). These are very small record producers, for whom producing recordings is less a conventional profession and more of a hobby, or just one component of their diverse musical activities within the field of (popular) music. These producers are involved with relatively fringe scenes such as experimental and electronic music, 'avant-rock', hardcore, punk and noise, and maintain a complex discourse on their musical practice. They generally appreciate the sincerity of amateur activities, something they aspire to cherish, while also claiming they are doing many things professionally—although in creative or underground terms. I conclude that they aspire to pave a way for a novel production activity that is uneasily located between more traditional binary concepts such as that of amateur/professional—something that other scholars have noticed as well (e.g. Strachan 2003).

Nevertheless, the academic discourse celebrating new online production possibilities for amateurs defines and analyses them almost exclusively in economic terms. Despite the emphasis on amateurism in accounts of the "new online record production framework", it is assumed that artists will naturally aspire to being professional, in a rather limited sense. For instance, the prime question seems to be over whether amateurism is "viable" and whether it affords an economically sustainable (or professional) career. In his seminal study of the music industry in the digital age, Patrik Wikström (2009: 7, 118, 156–9) applauds the new production and distribution possibilities of amateur musicians, while doubting their possibility to make a living. From the quote below, we not only see

that artists are labelled according to whether they are signed or unsigned, but the viewpoint of the A&R agents of larger record labels are highlighted.

Social network services open up yet another arena for the A&R agents' talent-spotting activities.⁶ Myspace and other similar social network services allow unsigned artists ... to shortcut the A&R agent and present their own music to the other members of the network. Data and basic statistics describing how other users respond to the artist's music and image are able to support the A&R agents' decision making (Wikström 2009: 166).

This assumes that all those unsigned would unequivocally want a record contract. Amateurs are considered an eager talent pool for producers (see Toyne 2000: xvii–xviii, 25–32), who pick the ones that meet the demands of present or future popularity.

Australian scholars Steve Collins & Sherman Young (2014) examine do-it-yourself careers from the viewpoint of the aspiring artists. They (105) build their theses of the prospering online opportunities on the arguments against the author Andrew Keen (2006), who—unlike almost any other author—actually complains about “the cult of amateur”. Keen (109–11) argues that professional cultural production is facing extinction as revenues and funding decline with the shift to Web 2.0 (see Fleischer 2010), and thus is doubtful of the sustainability of online careers. Collins & Young (105), meanwhile, defend the importance of e-commerce. Both studies implicitly define “professional” and “amateur” in economic terms. According to Keen (110; see also 31–32, 117), professionalism is the ability to “generate money” that amateurs lack, whereas Collins & Young (105) argue that amateurs develop less ambitious, yet nevertheless professional, careers with the aid of online services such as social media.⁷ Their point is that even if amateurs would not exactly break through, “it is possible to make a living as a musician by taking advantage of new media technologies” (103).

Although Collins and Young (97–8) acknowledge the popular, essentialist narrative of “record-label ‘success’”, they then go on to claim that professionalism may be the only way to recognise musical talent—no talent *should have* to agonise over unpopularity.

This cult of professionalism [of the “old” music industry] has never rewarded individuals according to pure talent—indeed, there are cases where extraordinary music has languished due to the lack of major label attention... The internet represents a possible salvation from total obscurity, a mechanism to bypass the traditional pathway to musical success. (Collins & Young 2014: 105–6).

According to them, success is achieved through gaining a sufficient number of fans globally and “monetising” one’s creativity. Monetising has now become a familiar term in the new music economy discourse (see Baym 2011: 24; Collins & Young 2014: 97–114; Prior 2014; Kim 2012). While usually defined as generating revenue from existing social networks (Clemons 2009; Kim 2012), in the record industry context it means commodifying free online musical content and consumption so that income can be generated from advertising, commercially useful information on audience behaviour, sales of recordings, concert tickets, sponsorships and so on.

Another scholar celebrating Web 2.0 and its lowered threshold to commercially exploit music making online, Tim Anderson (2014) describes the “lesson of Jonathan Coulton”, an aspiring artist. Joining the online record production discourse, Anderson describes how the artist has built a career with online tools and monetised success.

[I]n the early-2000s [Coulton] decided to leave his job as a computer programmer to pursue a life as a musician while dealing with new industry models...For Coulton, artists have to build an online presence and play a game of “pretend”:

[You have to] pretend the audience is there, even if you think it’s zero... If you’re consistent, word of mouth will grow your audience. (Feehan & Chertkow 2009)

Once the plan is engaged, Coulton notes, the artists better be ready to monetize because one never knows when a song or record will hit. (Anderson 2014: 168)

Just as Collins & Young (2014: 103–4), Anderson is inspired by *Wired* editor Kevin Kelly’s (2008) model, according to which a solo artist “only” needs to gain 1000 “True Fans” to become professional.⁸ He highlights the need for social engagement with these fans. Anderson cites Jed Carlson, the CEO of ReverbNation, a service that connects independent artists with (other) digital services:

[M]any [a]rtists have an untapped base of extremely loyal fans who have never been engaged to actively help them grow their popularity... This is a wasted marketing asset...[a]rtists with smaller followings often have a familiar relationship with their fans (read: friends and family) where established [a]rtists only have an affinity relationship. It is often the case that these close relationships can be the seed crystal that these

Artists need to grow from obscurity to local recognition in their area.
(Carlson 2008 cited in Anderson 2014: 179)

Anderson does not challenge Carlson's position and thus reproduces his entrepreneurial discourse.

The Economic Viability of Amateur Music Production

With reference to the *gift economy*, Nancy K. Baym (2011; 2018) explores, in an almost guidebook fashion, how artists and labels network online to sustain their business (or brand, cf. Tessler 2016).⁹ In particular, with regard to how Swedish independent record labels regard online piracy, she claims that

[t]he Swedish Model...actively encourag[es] “odd misdemeanours” in expectation that the gifts they offer...will circulate back to bring them just reward...[N]o one is sure how to make money in music anymore. Musicians, labels, and other entertainment producers are testing a huge variety of models...No one knows what will and will not work for which kinds of media in the long run. (Baym 2011)

She argues that while a gift economy is being somewhat forced on Swedish independent labels with the free online distribution of music, they are still able to transform it into a business model. Criticising major media companies that persecute copyright violators, Baym (2011:24) suggests that by connecting with fans and giving out music for free, labels effectively build audiences that could generate income, for example, in the form of sponsorships and live performances—in other words, “the Swedish Model”. While Baym's model tackles file sharing, in the more recent age, streaming online services such as YouTube and Spotify provide free access to music they host, portraying themselves as enablers of branding. Consuming music on the services does not per se generate much income for creators, performers, or producers: the services, however, justify it by the attention they are able to attract to the content, attention which is assumed to be monetisable in other ways.

In contrast, Baym (2011: 24; cf. Baym 2018: 87–110) criticises the way major music companies monetise every audience—seeing them as either “paying or stealing”. But perhaps she is failing to recognise that even in the Swedish gift economy model (resembling the current practice of providing streaming content on YouTube or Spotify for free) she advocates, the audience is still being similarly conceived as a market, although monetised in a different way. In the latter case the audience becomes the commodity, which is sold to advertisers (Smythe

2006[1981]) similar to the meaning of monetisation in the new media economy discussed earlier (e.g. Kim 2012: 56). In addition, the data gathered from users also becomes commodified as important information on consumer groups and their ways of consuming, valuable to the marketers and producers of recordings as well as to the artists and their managers.

While Baym is critical of a music industry obsessed with stardom (2018: 50–64), her focus on the “viability” of a modest career, similar to Collins & Young (2014; see Hracis 2012), neglects the type of grassroots musical culture in which making music does not have to “work” for its practitioners, in other words, it does not have to be economically profitable in the same sense that Baym (2011) attributes to her Swedish examples. Indeed, some of Baym’s case studies (2011: 28–9, 34, 37) may not engage with the gift economy in anticipation of building a new business model, such as the musician Fårm:

Let’s stop the exploitation of music. Let’s stop thinking of music as export business merchandise products. Let’s stop the people who try hard to infiltrate music scene just because they see money potential in it. (Baym 2011: 37)

One important dimension of the gift economy model that Baym (2018) does criticise, however, is the way in which the new online record production framework requires musicians to connect with their audience via social media. Fans might be put off by the feeling that this is not a sincere form of communication (as it is instrumental to business), while musicians, for their part, might feel burdened by needing to reciprocate social relationships. But her claim that “the only way musicians can avoid controlling [communication to foster a fan/customer base] is to opt out of capitalism” (Baym 2018: 98)—something she clearly considers unrealistic—shows the apolitical nature of her approach. In effect, she is suggesting that we should simply play along with the current neoliberal conjuncture and its entrepreneurial demands.

From a more historical perspective, Nick Prior (2010; see also 2014) has suggested that the monopolisation of expertise in music production may well have been a passing fad of the mid twentieth century. The development of digital technology has meant that non-specialist amateurs (or “prosumers”) now have access to specialist tools, which has restored the appreciation of amateurs to what it was a century or two ago—in times of “the aristocratic amateur” (Prior 2010). “New amateurs” have learned the skill-sets that were previously the exclusive domain of specialists to make what he calls “professional-sounding music”. As an example, Prior (404) describes the rise to fame of White Town in the late 1990s—the pseudonym of amateur producer and artist, Jyoti Mishra:

If one can avoid the “never give up on your dreams” sentimentalism that Mishra’s label promoted at the time, then it is still remarkable that an unknown Asian man in his thirties could single-handedly write and produce a hit song without huge commercial backing or support. It shows how cheap, modern musical technologies can be used to make professional-sounding tracks, and it demonstrates the viability of a grassroots mode of production.

Although Prior questions the romanticised image of the resilient, hard-working entrepreneur here, he is acknowledging that new amateurism is delivering economic opportunities that were practically unheard of previously. Suffice to say that, from Prior’s perspective, it seems that “being professional” is every amateur’s eventual goal. However, it must be noted that in his more recent work Prior (2018: 89–90) adopts quite a different tone, which I will discuss more below.

Online Tools Facilitating the Do-it-yourself Entrepreneurship

Tendencies such as those found in the aforementioned academic discourse are fairly common elsewhere in the literature on music production in the digital age, which commonly conflates do-it-yourself practices with entrepreneurship (e.g. Tschmuck 2016; Hearn et al 2004; Bruenger 2016: 219–44; Hracs 2012).¹⁰ In short, the discourse that celebrates new amateurs sees them simply as artists and producers who do not *yet* live from their trade, and it is this “yet” which is important. Observations evoking Fisher’s (2010) digital discourse on how technology can and will improve the economic status of amateurs assume that they all aspire to be professionals, and this assumption remains for the most part unquestioned.

What is made patently clear in this discourse—notwithstanding the few interviews cited by Baym (2011: 28–29, 34, 37)—is that a thriving music culture, where music is widely shared and socially enjoyed, is considered not so much the end in itself, but as a means to further a business. Social networks (often including the amateurs themselves) are seen as instruments that simply enable the promotion of oneself as an unknown artist. Recognition is foremost measured in terms of sales, audience, or sponsorship/record deals, as in Davies’ (2014) notion of the calculable, positivist tendencies in neoliberalism. The production tools are there not simply to produce music and share it, but to co-opt the whole commercial production process including marketing and distribution. The goal is not so much to flourish within the grassroots of a music culture, but to be “found”, to “make it in the music business”, and to “make money” or “monetise” your work

—in other words, to become a professional (in the economic sense). The intrinsic values in making, producing, and sharing music are thus overshadowed by their possible commodification and the promise of a professional career.

The music industry consultant, Mark Mulligan (2017) has observed a specific “post-DIY era”:

Now...we are seeing the emergence of a more commercially minded take on DIY...that combines [the practices of its predecessor] with the big label model to take full advantage of the best of both worlds. This new breed of superstar DIY artist enjoys the benefit of fiercely held independence with world class distribution and marketing. They are taking the tools of DIY but not all of the ethos. The superstar DIY artist typically builds a strong brand and buzz...and then uses that as a platform to strike a deal with a major label...to get the benefits of major label scale without giving up control.

This post-DIY shift would seem to follow the new online record production framework. The “entrepreneurial” amateurs that Mulligan has identified here are firstly self-producers who do not need the small labels previously associated with spotting ‘talent’ that major labels later grab. Secondly, these new amateurs use peer networks to gain recognition—except as self-producers, they also keep control of the entire production process. In this entrepreneurial scheme, the amateur networks merely become a utilitarian tool to success, as presaged by the new online production framework.

The Artistic Critique of the Artists and Producers

Illuminating the complexity of the current conjuncture, somewhat contradictory empirical notions exist in relation to the discourse on amateur production. These are apparent in popular music discourses such as those of independence, do-it-yourself, and underground that are intertwined at least to some extent.¹¹ Robert Strachan (2003; 2007) claims that “do-it-yourself independent micro[-] labels” are very small record producers that aspire to maintain the artistic autonomy of the artists that they release by providing an alternative to the perceived utilitarian production logic of the “mainstream music industry” which devalues artistic qualities.¹² This is related to a complex discourse about the term independence (from which the term “indie” came; Strachan 2003; cf. Hesmondhalgh 1998; Hesmondhalgh & Meier 2015)—and in this sense, the term is a clear instance of the artistic critique of capitalism (Boltanski & Chiapello 2005: 27–43).

John Encarnacao (2013: 247) claims that the “[r]hetorics of independence, oppositionality, amateurism [...] remain powerful in popular music”. This applies to micro-labels which, as Strachan has argued, certainly have an uncompromising attitude when it comes to professionalism and how this affects the relationship between art and commerce. According to Strachan (2003: 94, 234–7), being unprofessional is celebrated as being sincere in the same way as it was by the Romantics (see Frith & Horne 1987: 31–3, 39); whereas professionalism is denigrated for being cynical, calculating, utilitarian, and exploitative. Similar views are presented by micro labels elsewhere according to other studies (O’Connor 2008; Gosling 2004), such as the ones in Finland I have previously studied (Kaitajärvi-Tiekso 2016; 2018). Gosling (2004: 177) claims that for many British anarcho-punk bands of the late 1970s, setting up their own label was “at best a necessarily evil” (cf. Hesmondhalgh 1998; O’Connor 2008).¹³ Virtually all the Finnish labels under study also express an aversion to a certain type of professionalism, too: instead of mastering the economy, it is the ‘creative’ side of their endeavours that they prefer to treat “professionally”, in the sense of being serious (cf. Graham 2016: 148–9).¹⁴

Most micro labels and the artists whose material they produce on recordings could also be labelled as underground, “noncommercial forms of music making that exist in . . . loosely integrated cultural space on the fringes and outside mainstream pop and classical genres” (Graham 2016: viii; cf. Strachan 2003; Gosling 2004; Hesmondhalgh & Meier 2015).¹⁵ In a seminal study on the latter, Stephen Graham (2016: 9–13) highlights that the underground has avoided what he considers to be a remarkable increase in the accessibility of mainstream audiences to music by digitalisation:

[T]he underground has never been set up around such blocking structures. It has always been...[a] cultural space [without market intermediaries], providing...an alternative or supplement to capitalist modes of exchange. Within this anintermediated [sic] space, little division has existed between musicians and other musicians, labels, and audiences [cf. Reynolds 2013]. This flattened, participatory set of relations in the underground—although not universal—is one of its defining characteristics. (13)

While Graham’s notions on the underground might verge on idealisation, it provides another example of how neoliberal imperatives are challenged within (popular) music cultures.

In the grassroots—or beneath it, underground¹⁶—the gift economy celebrated by Baym is not generally employed in anticipation of building a new business

model, but often just to find receptive audiences to connect with.¹⁷ In Baym's preferred revenue model, fans become the object of monetisation, but, since fans are often fellow musicians and friends, especially for non-professionals, the practice clearly faces the artistic critique of capitalism—questioning the authenticity of the relationship of the artist and the consumer of art (see Boltanski & Chiapello 2005: 455–7)—as we have seen expressed by artists such as Fårm or other proponents of idealistic independence and amateur discourse above. Baym (2018) herself is concerned with this aspect in her critique of the social, communicative demands imposed on artists—which could be classified as the artistic critique as well.

The tendency to emphasise the economic opportunities in digital music culture (Wikström 2009; Keen 2006; Tschmuck 2016 etc.) ignores the fact that many artists and producers do not focus on profiting, maximising their revenues, or monetising their audience or “creativity” (Collins & Young 2014). A number of examples I have presented above demonstrate that idealistic artists and producers do not seem so willing to adapt to the new online record production framework—stubbornly insisting there is something else at stake than simply earning a living. From the perspective of both underground artists and micro labels, their “grassroots mode of production” (Prior 2010) is already viable by simple virtue of the fact that they can afford to put the records out.¹⁸ As Prior (2018, 89) himself notes in his recent work, new amateurs are not “particularly interested in ‘making it’” (cf. Prior 2010; 2014).

On the basis of the above, the idealistic amateur discourse such as those of micro labels or underground artists therefore corresponds to Boltanski's and Chiapello's artistic critique (cf. Haynes & Marshall 2017a). In this respect, when DIY or underground artists and producers are seen through the prism of the new online production framework and theories of the neoliberal self, they challenge the notion of the conjuncture being explicitly neoliberal.

Conjunctural Cross-Currents: Neoliberalism and the Artistic Critique

The start of this article posited that a conjuncture consists of multiple dimensions such as the sociocultural, economic, or political. The way I have presented the academic discourse that underlies the new online record production framework here reveals that, at least in the sociocultural dimension of the conjuncture, the “economic realism” (Davies 2014) of neoliberalism is emerging as the dominant force. Namely the economic logic of viability has priority—indicating how academics are also being moulded by neoliberalism (see Lazzarato 2015; Hesmondhalgh 2014). In this way the political and economic currents are leaking into the sociocultural, creating eddies that feed back into the political and

economic currents supporting them.¹⁹ And so, the conjuncture spins off further into neoliberalism.

However, as research on idealistic non-professionals such as micro labels and the actors of underground scenes indicates, there is one sociocultural current that runs counter to the entrepreneurial logic of neoliberalism. These amateur artists and producers associate their creative undertakings and accompanying social networks with intrinsic values that challenge the economic logic of “viability”, and thus fit within the artistic critique. But with the evolution of capitalism into neoliberalism, Boltanski and Chiapello (2005: 420) claim that the artistic critique is now redundant.

Must we not...ask if the forms of capitalism...developed over the last thirty years, while incorporating whole sections of the artistic critique and subordinating it to profit-making, have not emptied the demands for liberation and authenticity of what gave them substance, and anchored them in people’s everyday experience?

Yet, in their steadfast disavowal of the profit motive, deliberately non-professional artists and producers are clearly standing by the artistic critique and show that it is far from waning. This teleology is rooted in the discourse of independent production that emerged in the late 1970s (Hesmondhalgh 1998; Strachan 2003), which is the period in which, Boltanski and Chiapello argue, the artistic critique began to succumb to the new spirit of capitalism. In spite of the idealistic non-professional artists and producers testifying to the endurance of the critique, I agree with them that it faces some contemporary challenges. I will go on to tackle these, but only after first pointing out some other complexities in the conjuncture.

While I acknowledge that neoliberalism has indeed heavily influenced the new online record production discourse—treating it as one part of the greater digital discourse (Fisher 2010)—it is also clear, as can be seen from the literature I have analysed, that ever-improving digital tools have nevertheless democratised music production methods. However, this much-touted democratisation is one that has been conditioned by neoliberalism. The technological improvements are seen, foremost, as a means of professionalising oneself as an entrepreneur—indeed this aim is often their starting point—as in contrast, non-aspiring artists and producers can be seen as illustrating the further breadth of the potential of the improvements. This reduction, however, involves conflating all amateurs into a monolithic group, when in fact it consists of entrepreneurial achievers as well as deliberate non-professionals, and also, as Toynbee (2000: 27) notes, those who have made a virtue out of not succeeding.²⁰

But then the practices of micro labels and underground artists are not exclusively grounded on artistic autonomy and authenticity—their activities must clearly be commodified to some extent. Costs, at least, have to be covered by selling products or tickets, and producers and artists equally want their products to get attention, even if it is just within their particular micro-cultural community. As Graham (2016: 54–63) points out, autonomous musicians and micro-labels which (have to) operate outside institutional funding cannot totally isolate themselves from a market or audience; furthermore, in an economic environment where one unchallenged principle is branding, their clear commitment to ‘anti-marketing’ can in itself be construed as a valuable brand (see Taylor 2016: 44–79).²¹ On reflection, even though the artistic critique champions creativity, freedom, and authenticity irrespective of market success, this does not mean success is automatically ruled out if the former values are maintained. This resonates with Boltanski’s & Chiapello’s (2005: 96–8, 419–82) argument that capitalism was able to incorporate the former qualities into its new spirit (although with some contradictions that have left room for the revival of the artistic critique). Conjunctural analysis of the new online production framework as well as underground scenes and micro-labels thus reveal various cross-currents which show that the development of neoliberalism has not been straightforward. Even if the underground and micro-label discourses are stripped of all idealisation, they afford precisely the kind of rupture in the process of neoliberalisation from where the latter can be contested along the kind of ‘optimism’ Rancière (2009: 25–49), Lazzarato (2017: 149–205; see Gilbert 2017: xl–xli) and Beverley Skeggs (2014) have called for (cf. Hesmondhalgh & Meier 2015).

Conclusions

Information technology has strongly influenced contemporary music production and the values surrounding it. I have suggested that there is an emerging discourse on contemporary amateurs in the digital realm, which I have called the new online record production framework. I attribute its instrumental and entrepreneurial qualities to be a (perhaps unconscious) symptom of the strong neoliberal current in the present conjuncture, internalised in an academic discourse on cultural production.

The various theories of neoliberalism that have proliferated over the last few decades have been criticised either for inconsistency, epoch construction, or reductive idealisation by advocates of conjunctural analysis (Clarke 2010; Lehtonen 2016) among others (e.g. Wacquant 2012). This study has sought to examine their worth in specific, spatiotemporal discourses on contemporary amateur music production. In terms of neoliberalism, the study has focused on the spread of

the entrepreneurial self (McGuigan 2014; Lazzarato 2012) as embodied in the calculative, utilitarian reasoning detected by Davies (2014). Boltanski & Chiapello (2005) attribute current capitalism with a similar kind of extrinsic evaluation, but also expose it to the social and artistic critique.

The instrumentalism of the new amateur music economy discourse has meant it has emphasised, rather one-sidedly, the importance of music production tools that have allowed hobbyist practices to become careers for many. This has then eclipsed the intrinsic value of amateur music production. But, as we have seen, a cross-current reflecting a different attitude to amateurism prevails among idealistic small-scale artists and record producers (e.g., Strachan 2003; Graham 2016). For these 'anti-professionals', the importance of success is downplayed or made to seem irrelevant. Intentionally or not, this implies a preference for intrinsic, creative values over the more extrinsic professional values of cultural activity which, if left unchecked, can become a calculated form of utilitarian instrumentalism that corresponds to neoliberalism.

The economic emphasis that has emerged and which I attribute to neoliberal subjectivity has thus not been universally adopted. But at the same time the discourse of deliberate non-professional artists and producers is somewhat compromised as they are nevertheless directly or indirectly affected by capitalism no matter how Romantic their views on anti-professionalism as a form of anti-capitalism may be. They cannot simply isolate themselves from the economy, as they rely on a market for their production tools and another market for selling their products. A certain ambiguity remains over the point at which communicating a cultural product becomes their own form of branding.²² In the light of recent insights (Hesmondhalgh & Meier 2015; Mulligan 2017), there is only a residual commitment (Williams 1977) remaining in the conjuncture to cultural values such as independence at the expense of profit. Cultural activity has become increasingly governed by social media and the internet and is thus dependent on technology companies and how they implement monetisation (Hesmondhalgh & Meier 2015; Fuchs & Sandoval 2014; Haynes & Marshall 2017a). This development has affected even those producers with cultural objectives, such as underground artists and micro labels, with the result that their artistic critique (Boltanski & Chiapello 2005) has lost some of its edge as a political and cultural challenge to capitalism.

The underground artists' and micro labels' version of the critique might need a reform, as their subcultural production in the present conjuncture is closer to complementing—rather than contradicting—neoliberalism (see McGuigan 2014; Hesmondhalgh & Meier 2015).²³ While Boltanski's and Chiapello's concept of the artistic critique is not without problems, they do point out the need to bring it up to date, and to this end even offer some suggestions how (Boltanski and Chiapello

2005: 466–72). They claim, for instance, that the new capitalism of networked individuals endorses utilitarian relations with other people and “artefacts”, which in turn downplays their intrinsic values. In other words, social relationships and artefacts have become commodified, and this should be limited. In this respect, they convincingly argue that a revitalised artistic critique should defend the intrinsic values of people, and the uniqueness of artefacts or places. Not only does this tally with the artistic critique as expressed by the ‘anti-professionals’ (see Lazzarato 2017: 149–205)—namely the need to value cultural products in themselves, whether or not they are exploitable (cf. Gilbert 2017: xl)—but also with the ecological critique of preserving the natural environment with its inhabitants.

Boltanski and Chiapello, and their critics—such as Lazzarato (2017)—remind us that you cannot have a critique of capitalism without a social component, for example a critique of unequally distributed wealth. For idealistic artists and producers, a more comprehensive critique could prove to be effective with regard to the digital realm, where powerful companies mediate in all forms of communication and production (whether amateur or professional) and reap the most rewards, often leaving not much more for small-scale actors than the ‘noble’ possibility of simply making their work available to an audience (Hesmondhalgh & Meier 2015). Here, raising the level of entrepreneurship among small-scale actors hardly is the answer. An important next step in studies on cultural production and the music industries would be to examine just how this social critique could be levelled at the ways in which digital music is produced. Despite their fundamental nature, such political questions are all too often neglected in music industry studies. Studying them would allow for a development of a more creative musical culture by allowing artists and producers to pursue a wider range of goals while, at the same time, supporting all participants more equally.

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Notes

1 Web 2.0 was coined by Tim O'Reilly in 2005 to market a more interactive World Wide Web (Collins & Young 2014; Fuchs & Sandoval 2014).

2 Artist Revenue Streams. Future of Music Coalition, <http://money.futureofmusic.org/>. Retrieved May 11, 2020.

3 Record production encompassing e.g. recording, mixing, mastering, reproduction, distribution and promotion.

4 This viewpoint is familiar for example from the work of Polanyi (2009), Bourdieu (1998), and even the economist Thomas Piketty (2014: 575).

5 American neoliberal theoreticians referred here consist of mainly Joseph Schumpeter, Friedrich von Hayek and Gary Becker. Schumpeter is however not generally considered as neoliberal, although he is sometimes considered as a part of the neoliberal canon or at least influencing it (McGuigan 2014; Davies 2014; Foucault 2008; Plehwe & Mills 2012).

6 In larger record labels, artists & repertoire personnel are responsible for finding up-and-coming recording artists and song material.

7 Keen also argues that top-quality, expensive recording projects are impossible in the new music economy, which is addressing a wider aspect to being professional (112–3), although it is not specifically treated in his book.

8 Supposedly, to achieve this goal the aspiring artists are expected to compete for the attention of the potential fans.

9 Baym does not specifically examine amateurs. However, she locates her study within participatory culture (Jenkins 2006), emphasising the fading of the border between producers and consumers or professionals and amateurs (Baym 2011; 2018: 50–64).

10 While Hracs (2012) actually speaks of “independent” producers, the meaning corresponds to the DIY producers of the other aforementioned studies.

11 Similar ‘hobbyist’ tendencies are shown by the ‘ordinary’ amateur musicians in Finnegan’s (1989) work in Milton Keynes, UK, although their premises of music making are clearly less politically inclined and not as much recording-oriented (155–9) as in the other cases.

12 However, likewise Mulligan (2017) above, Bennett & Guerra (2018) note that the “transformation of DIY into . . . a global ‘alternative culture’ has also seen it evolve to a level of professionalism that is aimed towards ensuring cultural and, where possible, economic sustainability” (cf. O’Connor 2008). Additionally, many independent artists and producers could be described as professional (Hesmondhalgh & Meier 2015).

13 However, according to Gosling (2004: 175), US anarcho-punk labels were conducted in a more entrepreneurial, professional fashion, thus more distinct from Strachan’s concept of a micro label (cf. previous endnote).

14 Implying that professional labels often do not take the art itself so seriously. Furthermore, in O’Connor (2008), the studied labels value autonomy above professionalism or economic logic.

15 The operators of micro labels are often artists themselves, while many DIY underground artists are also self-producers.

16 Figuratively speaking: my intention is not to insinuate that underground music would be inferior to music in the grassroots.

17 See previous quotation of Graham (2016, 13). Likewise, micro labels' audiences often comprise of similar enthusiasts as the founders (Strachan 2007; O'Connor 2008).

18 Whether this is "professional-sounding"—as Prior (2010) claims of the new technological affordances of the "new amateurs"—or not is another matter that would require another article to fully explore.

19 Neoliberalism is also a political force, despite it having been described as the "disenchantment of politics by economics" (Davies 2014: 1–34).

20 The reduction applies to all music-makers in the discourse. However in a later study, Prior (2014) also discusses the new opportunities available for learning to play an instrument at the beginner level (thus not only for aspiring professionals). Naturally many artists and producers fluctuate between being popular and not; between professional, semi- and non-professional careers.

21 Although they avoid marketing campaigns, many of the labels and promoters do advertise on a small scale, and nearly all of them inform their peer and audience networks of new releases on mailing lists and social media.

22 The line between communicating information and advertising is interestingly blurred in cultural production.

23 This is more due to the pervasive and inventive methods of commodification—"real subsumption" (Read 2009)—than the fading dedication of the 'anti-professionals'.

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