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Philipps Universität Marburg

Owning It

Made in Chelsea and the Post-Work World

J D A Winslow

Abstract

This paper analyses the constructed reality TV show Made in Chelsea *as a vision of a post-work world. Specifically I situate the programme as providing a more realistic vision of a post-work economy than that set out by left futurists advocating for fully automated luxury communism. Through an analysis of the depiction of work and play within the show it becomes apparent that any apparent boundaries between the two are rapidly collapsing, with both subsumed under the auspices of* performative authenticity. *I argue that increasing automation will more likely lead to* fully automated luxury communicative capitalism, *unless left futurists acknowledge the affective aspects of social media use.*

Keywords: reality TV, post-work economy, performative authenticity

Introduction/Overview

Made in Chelsea,[1] the long running structured reality TV show that focuses on the "lives, loves and awks" (Made in Chelsea 2018) of wealthy, almost exclusively white and heterosexual twenty-something year olds living in London, might seem an odd choice to subject to detailed analysis. However, the thesis I wish to advance here is that *Made in Chelsea* offers us a potential "post-work imaginary" (Srincek and Williams 2016: Ch. 6). These people are, as is clear from the endless shots of expensive cars, carefully crafted milk-based coffee drinks and lovingly plated dishes, living at the leading edge of late capitalism. This reading also aligns us with Srincek and Williams' aims whereby "The post-work imaginary generates a hyperstitional image of progress – one that aims to make the future an active historical force in the present" (Srincek and Williams 2016: Ch. 6). This reading is necessarily based upon the assumption that work is in decline, and that this decline is currently "stalled because our social infrastructure cannot bear the consequences" (Mason 2015). Left futurists such as Mason and Srincek and

1 "Made In Chelsea – All 4", 2018, Channel4.Com, Accessed January 6, http://www.channel4.com/programmes/made-in-chelsea.

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Williams tend to frame this post-work imaginary as a utopian one, as a stepping stone to a state of fully automated luxury communism. I will here read out from *Made in Chelsea* what appears a more likely outcome of the current trend of automation, something I term *fully automated luxury communicative capitalism*, in contrast to the communism hinted at by left futurologists. The outcome I predict is one where labour is rooted in what Reckwitz terms *performative authenticity* (2017). By this I mean that labour (and leisure) is increasingly predicated on the subject's desire "to be authentic, to be 'truly itself'" (Reckwitz 2017).

The essay will then begin with analysis of a particular episode of *Made in Chelsea* (namely Series 14 Episode 6[2]), divided into two sections. The first will focus on the concept of *work without work*, best described as "forms of work without pay or work that is fun" (Dean 2013: Section 6) – in short, the way in which *Made in Chelsea* depicts sites of labour. The second section will focus on the concept of *play without play*, best described as "forms of play for which one is paid and play for which one pays with enjoyment" (ibid) – the way in which *Made in Chelsea* transforms the social interactions of its cast members into a site of labour. It is worth noting that the two distinctions drawn here must be viewed as merely *useful* within the specific context of this analysis. Furthermore the programme's inherent blurriness between labour and free time aligns the programme further with discourses around post-capitalism and the end of labour. Both sections will necessarily address the way in which these aspects of the show provide evidence for the idea of performative authenticity as the primary driver of a post-work world. Following this I describe what I view as a more likely outcome of current trends, namely that rather than a utopian post-work vision *(fully automated luxury communism)* we instead face the rise of a dystopian post-work scenario, (something I here term *fully automated luxury communicative capitalism*). By this I mean not to discredit the work of left futurists such as Srincek and Williams or Bastani, but rather to highlight the dangers of a pattern of leftist thought that fails to account for the shifting role of work in future economies.

Before this it is perhaps necessary to situate this essay in the wider context of critical responses to reality television more generally. A key point I wish to stress here is that I attempt to offer an alternative to Andrejvic's assertion that reality television consists of *the work of being watched* (2004: 6). Andrejvic would appear to advance the thesis that reality television provides an opportunity for a variety of people to gain capital through appearing on reality shows. While this still rings true for shows such as *Love Island* or *The Only Way Is Essex* I contest that *Made in Chelsea* remains at least partially exempt from this critique. I make this claim on two grounds. The first aspect I wish to highlight is the wealth of the participants, a number of whom (including Oliver Proudlock, mentioned below)

2 It's hard to define precise reasons for choosing this episode over any other – the episodes are broadly speaking, all the same. This episode does have the merit of being, at the time of writing, relatively recent.

hail from Eton, the same elite boarding school that has produced over a third of British prime ministers. This high net worth places them in a structural position of relative power, as they have no financial need to participate in the show. It is worth asserting that in this sense the show has clear parallels to *The Hills*, which too possessed a cast described by Hearn as "wealthy, young, beautiful and deeply uninteresting" (2010: 67). The second aspect to highlight is the show's status as a *constructed* reality show, that is a show where certain aspects are created or staged. It is here that my approach departs more significantly from that employed by Andrejvic or Hearn. While it is immediately tempting to discuss the show using Andrejvic's term of *the work of being watched*, or Hearn's vision of the cast of *The Hills* as being engaged on and off screen in "one seamless flow of value generation" (ibid: 61) I will here aim to analyse only what is shown on screen, to read as one might a dystopian novel, as a cautionary tale of a possible future.

Work without work

Let us begin with an analysis of work without work, with an initial focus on Dean's subcategory of *work without pay*. The scene I wish to focus on here lasts around a minute and presents us with two cast members (Louise and Proudlock) discussing Louise's brother's recent break-up. The format we are presented here is fairly typical for the show, with two or more cast members gathered in a glossy location to discuss an assigned topic. The setting for this particular scene is Proudlock's office – something, that though never directly referenced by either character, we are told by the appearance of nondiegetic text. At the same time as the subtitle imparts this information the camera drifts gently down towards the large table behind which the cast members sit, drawing our attention to the fabric samples, cutting tools and single small buddha statue laid out upon it. Behind this are an array of clothes stored on racks and in boxes. As Louise implores Proudlock to help her brother with overcoming his recent break-up Proudlock holds what appears to be a tailor's chalk pencil.

In short, we are presented with all the necessary conditions for labour to take place, but then shown, instead, a deeply personal conversation. Indeed Louise's appearance in the office highlights the porosity of the space. While nominally being a space for work Proudlock is still available to discuss personal matters. This would seem to tie in with one of Srincek and Williams central assertions, namely that: "Overcoming the work ethic will be equally central to any future attempts at building a post-work world" (2016). This may seem a somewhat snide comment, but what I mean to emphasise is how it helps us to understand that a key purpose of Proudlock's enterprise. Rather than a place of work the office (as portrayed on screen) reveals itself as part of a wider *"practice of authentification"* (Reckwitz 2017). The site of (labour-free) labour is shown here merely to provide us with an important insight into who Proudlock is – thus we see work becoming *merely* a part of this *practice*

of authentification. Thus Proudlock shows us simultaneously how although "Work has become central to our very self-conception" (Srincek and Williams 2016: Ch. 6) it is possible to do this without working as such, allowing us to "make the future an active historical force in the present" (ibid). Louise's presence in the office, and the conversation that takes place, shows us the potential of a work space that is not exclusively for work, but is rather one aspect of a wider *practice of authentification*.

This becomes a little clearer when assessing Proudlock's work as *unpaid work*. I should stress here that I do not claim that Proudlock's current position is work that is, as such, unpaid, but rather that the industry within which he *performs as working* necessitates that his work *may* be unpaid. The fashion industry typically requires aspiring designers to commit to unpaid internships in order to gain a role within the business. Again it is difficult to assess, based on on screen evidence, whether or not Proudlock has done this, but what I wish to suggest instead is an implicit understanding by the viewer that the career chosen by Proudlock is not designed to make him wealthy, but is rather one he undertakes out of a desire to work within the industry which takes, as its starting point, unpaid internships. Indeed, if I briefly renege on my promise to focus purely on the screen I would hazard a guess that Proudlock did not complete unpaid internships, most probably because he was already *too wealthy, too well connected*. It is worth pointing out that the form of labour shown here is typical of those segments of the show when someone is shown at work, fashion, photoshoots, painting, novel writing are all shown as forms of work. At no point is there a suggestion that this work is being done in order to earn money, it is rather *unpaid work*.

Work that is fun

The second category proposed by Dean of *work that is fun* becomes most clear in a brief sequence that occurs somewhat later in the show. The setting here is a bar, where four cast members, Mimi, Toff, Francis and Fredrik, are catching up over some cocktails. The bar is necessarily high-end, and functions again as an oft repeated set-up within the show, where various cast members are gathered in a location to socialise for the camera. The exchange, after some obligatory cheersing, goes like this:

TOFF: What have you been up to? Have you been busy?
FRANCIS: Umm, you know, just working on my cider, putting the final touches to it.
FREDRIK: You know he's teetotal and he's launching his own cider?
MIMI: Oh that's pretty cool.
FRANCIS: Well, uhh, I'm not teetotal, I will drink my cider.
FREDRIK: [*making an emphatic sweeping hand gesture*] But nothing else
FRANCIS: Nothing else.
TOFF: [*laughs*]

Let us assess then the way in which this "work that is fun," (Dean 2013: Section 6) functions as a *practice of authentification*, primarily as part of "the presentation of oneself as genuinely singular" (Reckwitz 2017). This then explains the importance of Fredrik's avowal that Francis is teetotal, followed by the subsequent disavowal of this fact, to be replaced by Francis's own statement that he is not teetotal, but will rather only drink his own cider. Hence we are taken from the statement that he is teetotal, which is, whilst not completely unheard of, certainly unusual, to a disavowal of this statement so as to allow us to reach the statement that he is not teetotal as he will drink his own cider that he produces, though nothing else, a practice significantly closer to being "genuinely singular" (ibid). The form of work here typifies what I would state forms a kind of *second type* of work discussed within *Made in Chelsea*, namely a kind of *work as project*. I claim here that *work that is fun* functions as a clearer way of classifying this form of work. In contrast to Proudlock's fashion career (which functions as a wider *practice of authentification*) the *work as project* would appear to be tied more specifically to the presentation of oneself as "genuinely singular" (ibid). Here this is perhaps most clearly illustrated by Francis Boulle's career within the diamond mining industry. There is no suggestion that making cider is, for an industrial magnate, a serious career, yet equally the cider is not conceived of as within the sphere of leisure. He is *working* on it, and will *launch* it, something that provides a clear distinction from the average homebrewer. Again this pattern of *work as project* is repeated many times within the show, with characters putting on exhibitions, organising parties or arranging charity events, all framed as being a form of work tangential to their main career. What is important to the wider thesis I advance here is that this model of work as creative, variable and independent, fits with that espoused by proponents of *fully automated luxury communism*. Indeed, thus far the vision presented (if we consider solely what we as viewers shown) is arguably utopian. The cast live a life of gentle luxury, with a work life focused on a career that they are passionate about, with enough space within this to focus on other projects as and when they choose. To reveal the more dystopian aspects of this vision of the future let us now turn to the notion of *play without play*.

Play without play

It is, self-evidently, a little harder to define play than work, and what I will be mostly focusing on here is not play as such, but is rather the discussions and activities engendered by Sam, who has recently gone through a break-up (the same one discussed by Louise and Proudlock). This, if we accept that play, here, can be taken as simply not work, certainly comes under the term of "forms of play for which one is paid" (Dean 2013: Section 6). The scenes discussed here can also be seen as linking to discourses around social networks as a site of labour – in short, the idea that "Feelings can be profitable" (ibid: Section 1). It is worth noting that

the storyline we are presented, of the fall out from a relationship, is a fairly typical one. *Made in Chelsea* can be seen as taking as its primary site of labour (as a TV show) the process of falling in and out of love, of converting romantic interactions into capital. What is interesting here, in the way that we are presented with Sam's attempts to get over his break-up, is that they are portrayed as necessary things that need to be done, in short, as work. Hence, we are shown, in order, throughout the episode, Sam being cajoled by other cast members (the opening scene focuses on Louise and Toff encouraging Sam to pick himself up, using, in part, a large basket of chocolate chip muffins, none of which are actually eaten), Sam discussing his recent break-up with a life coach, who demands the erasure of a tattoo Sam has of his ex's initials and Sam's visit to the tattoo parlour where he gets the tattoo covered up. The closing scene of the episode mirrors the opening scene, with the focus again on Sam and his recent break-up. Sam and Louise sit on cans of paint in Sam's new, as yet unfurnished, house,[3] drinking red wine and eating pizza, discussing the idea of change:

LOUISE: Congratulations. You've officially moved in.
SAM: Well not quite yet, but soon.
LOUISE: You don't have any furniture, hence we're sat on [*pauses*] pots of paint.
SAM: I know.
LOUISE: Congratulations, I'm so proud of you.
SAM: I know, it's so weird how life can just change so quickly and you're just like wow like I don't have my relationship of three years with the woman I thought I was going to marry, I'm, I'm not living, I'm about to live in a completely different scenario.
LOUISE: Mmm
SAM: It's just...
LOUISE: Oh my god. It's a lot of change. But you know people are really scared of change.
SAM: I'm [*pauses*] petrified.

I transcribe this conversation not due to its remarkableness (indeed it is wholly mundane, consisting almost entirely of wine-induced platitudes) but rather as a way of showing how the genuinely emotionally painful experience of a break-up (where one, rightly, feels petrified) is converted, through this sequence of scenes, into capital, returning us to the notion of feelings as profitable. What traditionally would have been part of one's personal life becomes part of one's work life. It is here that we see, most clearly, the vision of the future that *Made in Chelsea* grants us. Particularly in this final scene, we see how "the subject must be *different*, must make a difference by affecting the viewer" (Reckwitz 2017) as part of the *practice of authentification*. It is also here that the initial distinction I drew, between work as work, and play as play, collapses almost completely – the labour done by Sam,

3 I will refrain from discussing the economic factors that enable a 25 year old to purchase his own house in one of London's most expensive areas.

whilst aligning itself with the definition of "forms of play for which one is paid and play for which one pays with enjoyment" (Dean 2013: Section 6) is also aligned with the idea of "work that is fun" (ibid). It is surely not arduous to sit in one's freshly bought house with one's sister whilst drinking wine and eating pizza, yet here this is, self-evidently, done as work, part of the work of appearing on *Made in Chelsea*.

FALC versus FALCC

The concept of both work without work and play without play shown by *Made in Chelsea* then ultimately conform to the notion of performative authenticity, a subject that "circulates in a framework of an omnipresent *competition for visibility*" (Reckwitz 2017). What I wish to explore in greater detail is how this notion connects to the declining need for work, and how it can be read as providing us with a vision of one potential post-work scenario, in which the boundaries between work and leisure collapse completely, leaving us with only one source of labour, namely the endless process of authenticating our selves. This prospect recalls to some degree the vision laid out in Shteyngart's 2011 novel *Super Sad True Love Story* – indeed, Malewitz, whilst discussing *Super Sad True Love Story*, states that "characters' behaviors in the material world are structured by their expectations that such behaviors will advance their status in the digital world" (2015: 116). This then, appears to be the projected way out of the decline in work. Whilst work may increasingly become "work without work," play will do the same, becoming "play without play," leaving only the endless, futile attempts at performing a notional self in an inherently paradoxical manner. It is worth noting that Reckwitz's concept of performative authenticity would seem to tie strongly to Dean's recent writings on communicative capitalism which she holds:

> has overburdened the individual form to such an extent that individuality is commanded: be unique, be different, find yourself, care for yourself, be your own best self (2019).

It is this model of capitalism more generally, where "communication is central to capital accumulation" (Dean 2019) that provides a clear outline of a major flaw in current leftist utopian thinking. I make reference here to two works, with my analysis of Williams and Srincek's work supplemented by Bastani's *Fully Automated Luxury Communism*. In line with Lowrie I also hold that the post-work world Srincek and Williams advocate for is "something like fully automated luxury communism" (2016). The term is necessarily problematic, but here I define the fully automated luxury capitalism, that I will subsequently refer to with the acronym FALC, as a "society beyond both scarcity and work" (Bastani 2019: Introduction) with the proviso (not included by Bastani) that this is (or would be) a *good* society. In contrast to this vision I here suggest that *Made in Chelsea* offers us a

glimpse of a more likely dystopian version of a society beyond work, termed *fully automated luxury communicative capitalism*, or FALCC. I will not here attempt to tackle the claims of post-scarcity, although I would direct interested parties to Dean's claim that there is a "fantasy of abundance" (2005: 54). I also emphasise that the use of *Made in Chelsea* must be seen as an implicit critique of the manner in which such universalist ideas run the risk of "replicating the form if not the content of patriarchal, racist, and neocolonial capitalist rationality" (Lowrie, 2016). I make these remarks more as possible entry points into a further, more detailed critique of these ideas, but reiterate that the focus here remains on what writers such as Srincek and Williams take *post-work* to mean, and how communicative capitalism can help us to understand the flaws in this leftist futurology. I thus hold that while proponents of FALC accurately predict a decline in what is *currently considered* as work they fail to acknowledge how technology is producing *new forms* of work, or perhaps collapsing what we traditionally understand as work.

Made in Chelsea provides us with a clear model of how a future post-work economy might operate, and also illuminates how a more nuanced reading of automation and technology is required for any leftist vision of post-work world. Automation, within an FALC framework, holds that "machines will be capable of replicating ever more of what was, until now, uniquely human work" (Bastani 2019: The Three Disruptions). I do not contest the truth of this statement, but rather its conclusion. *Made in Chelsea* provides us with a vision of that work which remains as *uniquely human*, namely the generation of content, the generation of affect. This then would appear to be missing from this strand of leftist thought, an understanding that technology is no longer merely about increased efficiency of economic production, but about *feelings*.[4] Even if we take the vision put forward by someone like Bastani at face value, if we accept the notion that food and energy production will become automated, that our basic human needs will be fulfilled, there is still a failure to acknowledge the manner in which many of us spend our leisure time engaged in the generation of value through social media, through selfies, through pictures of our dogs, holidays, and loved ones, through *communication*. Srincek and Williams propose that capitalist technology must be repurposed, but fail to account for the manner in which technology does not just produce economic goods but encourages individuals to produce *themselves* as economic goods. In short, FALC texts continue to hold onto the notion that we must seize the means of *production*, without recognising that we must also seize the means of *communication*. It is, as ever, a little more complicated than this, with the distinction between means of communication and production increasingly blurred. However what I emphasise here is that the current direction of travel would appear to be a reduction (for the Global North at least) in what has been *considered* work in exchange for a form of being whereby everyday existence is

4 This omission seems somehow appropriate to the distinctly boyish tone adopted in both Srincek and Williams and Bastani's texts.

monetised through the generation of affect. The only flaw in *Made in Chelsea* for this vision of FALCC is the now retro form of television, the easy, visible presence of a singular screen that binds the action to a particular time and place. It is through this format, considered as a fiction, that we gain a vision of our future selves as "one seamless flow of value generation," (Hearn 2010: 61) spread across a multitude of screens, in a post-scarcity world of relative luxury.

Summary

Made in Chelsea provides a heuristic for viewing the twin categories of *work without work* and *play without play*. In the first it is evident that the participants in the show favour creative careers that do not necessarily provide financial gain, something dependant on their own personal status as thoroughly post-scarcity. This first case aligns more closely with the vision of a post-work world presented by the future left theorists discussed here than the second. *Play without play* makes clear how affective experiences are, through the auspices of the show, converted into a form of work. Finally I note again that these two categories as shown in *Made in Chelsea* are far from clear cut. However they may provide a useful model for thinking about how work, or what follows it, would look like in the face of increasing automation. Ultimately it is only through acknowledging the current frailty of such a distinction that we can fully arrive at a vision of a post-work, post-play world where value is gained only through the generation of affect, being as it is surely one of the more difficult aspects to fully automate. The more contentious aspect of what I claim here is that what *Made in Chelsea* depicts is dystopian, or at least *can be read* as dystopian. Much of what *Made in Chelsea* shows aligns in many ways with the stated aims of a leftist post-scarcity economy. However, what I contest here is that current thinking around FALC fails to acknowledge the role technology plays not just in the increased efficiency of economic production, but in the increased blurriness between work and play. My aim here is not to state that we should not strive towards visions of the future, but rather to outline an area for consideration in similarly ambitious texts. Necessarily all thinking that claims to be utopian acknowledges that the future portrayed is one that may never arrive, but that must not be taken as an excuse to ignore the affective realities of life lived in the communicative age.

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