Creativity and Its Discontents

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PART I

Understanding Creativity
Creativity as a Problem of Modernity

I devote chapters 1–3 to the theoretical explication of the meanings of creativity before analyzing the actual renditions and discontents of the creative economy in China. Our various understandings of creativity are characterized by the tensions and dynamics between freedom and control, art and design, textuality and industrialism. I believe the entangled relationships of these contradictions are rooted in the modernity project, adopted and reinforced by the creative economy as its latest manifestation. These three chapters provide an elaborate discussion of the ramifications of these dialectics in the operation of this creative economy, an economy as abstract as it is concrete. In chapters 2 and 3 I illustrate how creativity—largely through economic and legal mechanisms—is both mystified and made into a concrete property for today’s global capitalism. In this chapter I go back to history a little bit to begin my analysis of creativity, along with a genealogical study of the concept in the context of Western modernity. Readers might find this chapter too distant from today’s events in the world and in China, but I think it is important to lay a philosophical groundwork to understand the relationship between divine creativity and secular creativity in the West, which directly conditions how creativity is conceptualized and utilized globally today.

As it is widely studied, the modernity project is characterized by a particular Western epistemology, which, on the one hand, is driven by human desire for control over others and the world and, on the other hand, represents humanity’s own insecurity about this sovereign position. There is a clear tendency among human beings in recent history to order and subdue the world through industrialization, colonialism, and capitalism, and this incessant desire also demonstrates the enormous amount of anxiety involved. The drastic leap we see in this current phase of global capitalism is not a departure from this modernity project, but is its extreme manifestation, to the
Chapter One

point where creativity, which has been most resistant to instrumentalization, is made into a tool for its own alienation. Critics tend to describe the age of creative economy and the space of flows created by late capitalist societal networks as postmodern. I would argue instead that this economy is not a breakaway from modernity, but its most saturated manifestation, which therefore also contains the seeds of destruction.

To understand the relationship between creativity and modernity, we might need to go back to history. In the development of modern Western culture, the divine creative power has been secularized into two human capacities: artistic creativity and epistemological knowledge. But the two are not simply dichotomized: the latter has manifested into a strong tendency to control the former, whereas artistic creativity retains some of the mythic components of divine creation. The tensions and dynamics involved characterize, at least partly, the formation of modernity. I believe an investigation of the genealogy and various conceptualizations of creativity in Western modernity could bring to light the repressed links between creativity as a trans-sociohistorical force of creation and creativity as an individual author’s production of artistic works, which the creative economy utilizes selectively in part or in pairs. Establishing such links can help us to deconstruct the current modernity hegemony and to rediscover the indocile element of culture that is both germane and resistant to the logic of the creative economy.

In this chapter I analyze an array of understandings of creativity by prominent Western philosophers and thinkers. My purpose is neither to assert the supremacy of Western origin nor to conjure up a sense of continuous canonical thinking, but we must recognize that our global modernity is characterized by the hegemony of a particular Western thinking. With the global triumph of Western modernity, what grounds the development of China’s and other developing countries’ current socioeconomic development is not the culture’s own philosophical history but that of the West. One way to tackle that dominion is to confront the core of Western tradition and its repressions. Therein we shall find complex dialectics of suppression and complicity, as well as possibilities of alternative thinking.

Modernity and the Creative Economy

In the West creativity was not understood as a form of personal aptitude until the advent of modernity. We can trace this development back to the Enlightenment, from which point creativity has been secularized with an eye to privi-
leging anthropocentric epistemology over humans’ ontological existence. In *Keywords* Raymond Williams defines the original meanings of creativity: “The word [“create”] was mainly used in the precise context of the original divine creation of the world: creation itself, and creature, have the same root stem. Moreover, with that system of belief, as Augustine insisted, ‘creatura non potest creare’—the ‘creature’—who has been created—cannot himself create.” Williams then summarizes the secularizing process of creativity in the West, passing from the hands of God to man. The decisive development took place in the nineteenth century: in the beginning of the century the creative act was understood as conscious and powerful; by midcentury it had become conventional. Creativity, a general name for that faculty, followed in the twentieth century. Williams’s brief account points out the close connection between modernity and the democratizing process of creativity: creativity had been owned solely by God; with the advent of modernity the power to create was first given to the artist through his or her spiritual communion with Nature, and by the twentieth century anyone could be creative. The development of capitalism supported by the Protestant ethic also plays a key role in fusing creativity and progress. As Max Weber showed us, in the West the productivity of work in the capitalist sense was infused with the Protestant ethic of striving for the kingdom of God. Creation is transformed into productivity, which gradually becomes an end itself, to be supported by all kinds of innovative measures. With the moderns’ increasing desire for control and wealth, divine creativity materialized into an epistemological and economic endeavor through the forces of secularization and capitalism. The spiritual dimension of human creativity is therefore maintained in a contrived way: divine creativity must be secularized as human aptitude, but the secularized form becomes a manifestation of God’s grace. The philosophical tensions and structural leaps involved in this secularization process are intense, which I believe also inherently manifests a modernity problem.

Let us examine this history with some details, however scanty. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, creativity originally belonged to God. A simple dichotomy, as Williams points out, is thus established between God as the creator and humanity as the created. Given the direct equation of God with creation, humanity can create when empowered as God’s vehicle. In the Greek tradition, however, the notion of self-creation does not exist. The Platonic order is a manifestation of preexisting rules of Being, and Plato’s great architect, Timaeus, is a mere executor; he does not possess the creative power of the Creator God in the biblical tradition. In other words, there are two main
models of creativity that inform Western modernity: Plato’s understanding of creativity as rational reproduction of the intelligible and logical Being, and the willful Creator God of the Hebraic tradition.8

Simply stated, a major task and motivation of the Enlightenment was to come to terms with these two traditions and, not surprisingly, to subject the divine creative power of the Judeo-Christian tradition to Greek philosophy. It is mainly Platonic epistemology that has driven the ongoing development of Western modernity.9 The modern subject—specifically, that theorized by Descartes—does not aspire to be God, and he knows very well his limitations, in that he cannot grasp the infinite. But it is precisely this knowledge of both his finitude and the existence of the infinite that characterizes modern subjectivity. The unity of the modern subject is established less by his ability to create than by his ability to control a unified discursive field, or point of view, of the created world.10 The most important secularization project of Western modernity turned out to be not creating but understanding, since with knowledge humans can control what has already been created.

But the secularization of creativity continues its course, and is manifested in several different ways. The Judeo-Christian sense of divine creativity is passed down largely to become acts of art, and God’s moral dimension is maintained in the realm of law and ethics. But generally speaking, when capitalism pairs up with the Protestant ethic to turn creativity into productivity, it is the domain of knowledge that is assigned the key role in advancing modernity. We thus have a split between aesthetics and knowledge—artists create, scientists discover—but artistic creation is not put on a par with scientific discovery, and the latter remains the normative drive of modernity. Scientific discoveries are placed in a protected realm, ideally to be free from economic and moral considerations. It is true that the notion of the creative genius applies not only to the master artist; the most celebrated scientists are also hailed as geniuses who rebel against the status quo and are able to see things we ordinary people cannot. But only a small number of very original scientists receive the renown of the artist or the poet (thus possessing the mysterious divine link); in general, the creativity manifested within the realm of epistemology is understood as innovation, as opposed to artistic creativity that cannot be understood and calculated rationally. The mythic power of creativity is largely contained and curbed within the realm of art in order to prevent its corruption of the order of rationality. After Kant we see the rise of positivism, according to which truth and value are understood as discoverable, and philosophers were interested in the process and method of uncovering them. On the other hand, from the romantic to the modernist movements, artists
were increasingly encouraged to plunge deep into interiors; interiority is con-
ceptualized as the effect of a complex relationship between psychological and
formal aesthetic values. Such entanglement is probably most clearly observed
in nineteenth-century music.

This marginalization of art and the complete separation of the discursive
realms (epistemological, moral, and aesthetic) are central modernity issues
examined by Jürgen Habermas.11 Weber believes that knowledge, justice, and
taste, which can all be seen as aspects of the divine, were originally unified as
a coherent worldview in premodern society, but they are increasingly differ-
entiated in modern society into autonomous fields of reasoning, to the ex-
tent that they become mutually incompatible, excluding moral and aesthetic
ideals from modern social and political life. Habermas follows up on and
criticizes this triangular structure of modern reasoning. He promotes inter-
communication among the realms, which he believes would bring about a
“better” form of modern rationality that could prevent the irreparable splitting
of society into competitive value spheres as posited by Weber. Habermas
believes that modernity promises, instead of precludes, intercommunication
among the three fields, so that the arts can speak to the social once again. The
three spheres should be made relevant to each other, so that art can fulfill
modernity’s promise of critical self-reflexivity.12

Although Habermas criticizes the increasing marginalization of Western
arts, in reality artistic creativity has always attracted philosophers’ epistemo-
logical and moral investigation. Beginning with Kant’s Critique of Judgment,
Western aesthetic theory has been preoccupied with the pursuit and analysis
of the meaning of art: to engage in its definitions; to explore the experience
of reception in categories like pleasure, pain, or the sublime; or to examine
art’s sociopolitical functions. Although aesthetic judgments are probably the
most radical kind of reflective judgments among those theorized by Kant, and
are also the most difficult to understand, Kant’s strong desire to understand
artistic creativity clearly demonstrates an epistemological tendency in this
aesthetics. Acknowledging the impossibility of circumventing the full mean-
ing of art by some kind of empirical or transcendental framework, Kant still
struggles to find ways to understand art in the form of knowledge, resulting
in the extremely dense circular rhetorical movements in his third critique.13

A long and elaborate tradition of aesthetic philosophy follows. Even Alain
Badiou, who is highly critical of the Western philosophical tradition of aes-
thetics and calls his theory of art “inaesthetics,” finds “truths” in art.14 He
condemns the avant-garde’s false fusion of art and politics, as he believes
that the truth claims of politics and the truth claims of art are entirely differ-
ent. But through the mechanism of negation Badiou still wants to articulate how art and politics can be connected, particularly in critiquing late capitalism. Many critics with Marxist or feminist backgrounds are more willing to argue and establish the strong relationship between art and society.\textsuperscript{15} Such eminent social critics as Theodor Adorno and Georg Lukács regard authentic works of art and literature as being able to express conflicts within the larger sociohistorical process from which they arise and to which they belong, although Adorno emphasizes the autonomy of arts much more so than Lukács does.\textsuperscript{16} There is a long and prominent tradition of scholarship in the West that provides links among art, knowledge, and ethics. Whether these efforts are manifestations of Habermas’s Enlightenment ideals I do not know, but it is important to emphasize that they are not in fact simply marginal to but are prominent in Western philosophical traditions. Although there is a long tradition of Western artists painstakingly constructing fields of autonomy from other realms of control in the name of aesthetic independence, the domain of art is never completely independent, but is alive with epistemological desire stemming from the domain of knowledge and ethical desire from the domain of justice.

This surely is too simple a recounting of Western aesthetics, and it is not aimed at reducing a complex philosophical tradition into a simple narrative, but I want to point out the entangled relationship among knowledge, politics, and art, and that art is both autonomous and not. Art, as the progeny of divine creativity, is assigned a separate realm of subjectivity irrelevant to social praxis, but the Western modernity project is also characterized by an epistemological drive to unearth, and therefore control, the “truth” of art. There is such a strong desire to tame artistic creativity precisely because of its preservation of the mythical components of divine creativity, which are very powerful and alluring.

In fact Habermas’s advocacy of interrealm communication could also be understood accordingly, that the real danger is not the autonomy of artistic creativity, but the “wrong” usage of art. There have been strong criticisms of aestheticism, which, as Walter Benjamin demonstrates, could become a political tool for fascist purposes.\textsuperscript{17} Or, as Fredric Jameson proclaims, aesthetics is manipulated by the consumer culture to blind people and prevent their engagement with the social.\textsuperscript{18} While Benjamin and Jameson are vigilant against any domination of aesthetic identification that might dilute people’s autonomous rational thinking, Habermas promotes the intercommunication between the cultural and other realms to also prevent cultural modernity from servicing conservative traditions. Accordingly Habermas is not a critic
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of Western modernity, but his thinking is located at the very heart of it. Art, whose roots can be traced back to the Judeo-Christian conception of divine creativity, is nonrational and potentially dangerous; in order to make it socially productive, aesthetics must be contained within proper epistemology and morality.

Resistant to Meanings

As demonstrated, central to the modernity project is a desire to use and control creativity rationally, and creativity is so alluring yet threatening precisely because it retains part of the mythic power of divine creation. Its unpredictability and indocility make artistic creativity both resistant and germane to the modernity project. Not surprisingly, while there is a strong tradition in Western philosophy devoted to the understanding and therefore control of creativity, there is a dialectical side of the same tradition exploring the relationship between creativity and freedom, which we find in the writings of F. W. J. Schelling, Gilles Deleuze, and other philosophers as well as in more recent studies of modernist arts and culture by prominent critics such as Jameson and Mary Ann Doane. Their work and passion show that the desire to maintain the autonomy of arts from any epistemological control is more than latent in the Western tradition, and some thinkers’ will to be in command of creativity cannot be understood apart from others’ yielding to its liberating potential.

Let us start with Schelling, whose ideas of divine destruction laid the groundwork for many later thinkers in understanding the relationship between creativity and freedom. In a way, Schelling’s philosophy belongs squarely within the German idealism tradition, which privileges the controlling ability of human agency, corresponding to the tendency described in the previous section. As Schelling writes, his view “removes the inconsistent notion of the contingency of individual acts.” He believes that “true freedom is in accord with a holy necessity, of a sort which we feel in essential knowledge when heart and spirit, bound only by their own law, freely affirm that what is necessary.” However, dialectic to such German idealist convictions, Schelling’s philosophy is also characterized by a strong urge for freedom, which attracts and is carefully studied by later critics, such as Heidegger, Habermas, and Žižek.

Many critics are interested in Schelling because to Schelling, evil is not foreign to God, but God arises out of a struggle between two primordial antagonistic forces, one constructive and one destructive. According to Schelling,
the true Beginning is not God Himself, but the passage from the “closed” rotary motion of the struggle between the two antagonistic forces to the “open” progress, in which the notion of God arises. The actual God belongs to the realm of “existence,” which is “grounded” by a blind force of striving from the prior rotary forces. To Schelling, pure freedom is conceivable only within this primordial rotary motion of the mutual conditioning of the two antagonistic forces. If God arises out of this rotary motion, then pure freedom is prior to God, and it must be understood as a negative and contractive force, which is a Will that actively, effectively wants “nothing.” In other words, this primordial Freedom is a will that annihilates all positive, determinate content in order to retain that nothingness. Žižek, for example, finds Schelling so attractive largely because Schelling allows divine creation to go beyond the enlightenment framework, escaping the confines of rationality and morality. To Žižek, the primordial form of creation that Schelling describes is pure contraction, which constantly slides into the vortex of divine madness. Therefore Schelling’s God has its roots in madness. If we understand God as the perfect masculine subject, He is grounded in some kind of female madness providing the potentiality for God to actualize. Žižek is most interested in this “dark” side of Schelling’s God. Situated in both the domains of “closed” rotary motion and “open” progress, this God is in fact a “psychotic” God, and “this all-destructive divine vortex remains even today the innermost base of all reality.”

The contemporary philosopher who is most indebted to this understanding of creativity might be Deleuze, who is devoted to the demonstration of the dialectic construction and destruction of time and space. Schelling’s idea of divine madness finds a distant reverberation in Deleuzean theorization of capitalism. To Deleuze and Guattari, capitalism, among other creative forces, most vividly embodies the dialectics of construction and destruction, and they believe that capitalism and its challenges are both built on the constant rupture of established categories. In *Anti-Oedipus* they argue that capitalist production arrests the schizophrenic process and fashions its own chaos and death, but it also binds the schizophrenic charges and energies within interior limits, so the capitalist axiomatic is both destructive and constructive. In *A Thousand Plateaus* they describe that core to capitalism is a logic of the assemblage, which, as a general model of life formation, is composed of two mutually conditioning forces: territorialization and deterritorialization. Territorialization refers to the process that increases the internal homogeneity or the degree of sharpness of the boundaries of an assemblage, while deterritorialization refers to the opposite process. Capitalism is only one of the
many historical forces that interest Deleuze and Guattari, and it is a general process of becoming that really characterizes their work. As Jacques Rancière argues, core to the Deleuzean thought is a particular aesthetic thinking, which is in a constant process of dissensus, resisting both the artist’s intention and its material form. Peter Hallward also argues that Deleuze’s entire philosophy might be summarized as a philosophy of creation—one which is, however, constantly drifting toward disembodiment and dematerialization. Hallward summarizes Deleuze’s thinking thus: “Creation itself generates internal obstacles to its own continuation. Virtual creatings are obstructed by the actual creatures they produce, [therefore we need] to develop the means, from within our actual or creatural constraints, of overcoming these same constraints.”

Whereas Hallward finds Deleuze’s ideas too devastating, Žižek finds Schelling’s theory of creativity to be not destructive enough. To Žižek, Schelling ultimately fails to come to terms with the enormous potential of the new thinking he opens up, and ends up retreating into the safe waters of the Aristotelian ontological frame because “he is unready to accept the fact that God’s freedom is also the freedom of a forced choice, the gesture of freely assuming an imposed necessity.” In contrast, Hallward believes that Deleuze’s “subtractive” philosophy points all human activities, through creativity, toward disintegration, and that Deleuze fails to provide us with a constructive view of social life. With their different concerns, both Žižek and Hallward locate the destructive potentiality of creativity in their studies of key philosophers, and they both gesture to a way to turn such negative power into something more productive. In general, the destructive dimension of creativity, although marginal to Western modernity, has been very attractive to thinkers, in the sense that the strong desire in Western modernity to control creativity stems precisely from the danger of creativity.

Schelling’s theorization of God echoes Deleuze’s analysis of capitalism, as they both concern creation (of things and of capital), and they both demonstrate how creativity must be simultaneously understood as destruction. In addition to its destructive components, creativity is uncontrollable also because it is contingent, and we might say that some early modernist art is most devoted to the exploration of the relationship between creativity and contingency. As mentioned earlier, art becomes the embodiment of divine creativity in modern times, and modernist art incarnates most vividly the desire for freedom and the resistance to meanings that are fundamental to the enlightenment. In his recent book Jameson applauds the contingent dimension of early modernist art, but he finds most of the later established modernists’ cele-
bration of creative force a pretense and a failure, precisely because these artists do not recognize art’s contingent aspects as their predecessors unconsciously did. Contingency is another concept that resists instrumentalization.

Jameson uses the notion of contingency to distinguish between the two kinds of modernist art: classical modernism, whose practice was untheorized and nameless at the time of its various creations, is preoccupied with chance and accident, but late modernism tames creativity by focusing on the formal and representational problems of contingency. In his words, “Contingency is thus the word for a failure of the idea, the name for what is radically unintelligible, and it belongs to the conceptual field of ontology, rather than that of various epistemologies that succeed and displace an ontological philosophy in the ‘modern’ period (or since Descartes).” The component of contingency actually made creativity more powerful and alluring, because contingency is not governed by knowledge and order, and it also shows the destabilizing dimension of creativity. Jameson demonstrates that although modernist art claims to celebrate the liberating force of creativity that breaks down modernity’s boundaries, most of it actually freezes time by internalizing the past models it disavows. By not confronting true alterity, later modernist artists take refuge in form, which closes down all political possibilities: “Modernism is seen as originating in an ever-keener distance for what is conventional and outmoded, rather than an exploratory appetite for the unexplored and undiscovered.” In the name of celebrating creativity, modernist art strives to overcome, but at the same time also preserve, older content and technique.

In fact contingency has always been a problem for modernity. To incorporate culture under its order, the modernity project must monitor and control contingency. In her recent studies of early cinema developed between the end of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, Doane argues that modernity is characterized by two dialectical desires: the desire for contingency and the desire for structure. The first decade of cinema development demonstrates the gradual surrendering of the former to the latter. As many film historians have pointed out, the earliest occasional films (those which record the unstructured form of reality, like Lumière’s Exiting the Factory) were devoted to the documentation of everyday life, displaying the camera’s potential for recording. The images recorded are not necessarily “meaningful,” but they re-present how we experience our lives. The earliest extant occasional films therefore expose an early affinity between modernity and contingency and demonstrate that this affinity is advanced by the new technology of cinema, which opens up people’s sensory aptitude. They are called “occa-
sional” films because they demonstrate a fascination with contingency. But very soon early filmmakers began to ask how they could present contingency in interesting ways, to conceive film not as photographic recording but a series of images with “syntax.” Complex editing techniques were developed in order to cut away boring “nonevents,” leading to the development of classical cinema, which condenses space and time. As Doane argues, the structuralist desire of modernity can be seen as a battle against contingency. The classical Hollywood cinema model, for example, can be understood as anticontingency par excellence.

Both Jameson and Doane, through their different studies of modernist art and early cinema, conclude that modernity bears the potential to open up contingency and multiplicity, although this dimension is also largely repressed by modernity; modernity bears a dialectic tendency of promoting order and disorder. To Jameson, the works of earlier modernists, whose freedom is utterly blind and groping, are much more fascinating than the works of late modernists, and the latter anticipate their “creativity” in advance through the recognition and disavowal of earlier modernist masters and of the name “modernism” they carry. To Doane, occasional films, being the dominant form of filmmaking in its formative years, were doomed to be suppressed once filmmakers developed a more sophisticated control over the technology and the form. Once the category of “modern” was actualized into specific narratives and forms, the “modern,” as Jameson and Doane suggest, lost its sensibility to the power of contingency, and therefore the power of creativity. But at the same time the unrepresentable vision of the ceaseless flow of the absolutely new produced sheer terror; as Jameson stresses, no one can survive under the flux of perpetual change, and we all need a persistent identity over time to gauge our being. So the new is both desired and feared, not only by modernity, but by humanity in general.

Creativity as Social Practice

As demonstrated, modernity shows strong anxiety about and an equally strong fascination with artistic creativity, due precisely to its own components of unpredictability and contingency, which, as Schelling argued, might be directly passed down from divine creativity. This dialectic makes art both powerful and powerless, and it also indirectly explains the creative economy’s desire to tame and exploit artistic potentials. In general, I believe that the current creative economy is characterized by certain kinds of modernity logic, albeit intensified. Gianni Vattimo has written that “modernity is defined as the
era of overcoming and of the new which rapidly grows old and is immediately replaced by something still newer, in an unstoppable movement that discourages all creativity even as it demands creativity and defines the latter as the sole possible form of life.”34 The contradiction he points out is an important one: although modernity is fueled by creativity, it also makes creativity impossible. In the framework of modernity, Vattimo cautions, although newness is celebrated, it cannot be radical, but must fit into a teleology of progression, so that creativity, already conditioned by the logic of innovation, is always already epistemological. The same mechanism is currently running the creative economy. In the double logic of autonomy and functionalism, artistic creativity becomes powerful and usable, and the two oppositional forces of suppression and fetishism are fed into the same system, making creativity useful for capitalist development.

Not only does the creative economy reconcile and incorporate the oppositional understanding of creativity inherent in Western modernity, but it also, coming back to Habermas, overcomes the modernity segmentation among the aesthetic (fashion, novelty, and flexibility), the epistemological (knowledge and information), and the moral legal (largely in the form of neoliberalism and IPR). As such, creativity has become not simply something to be controlled and manipulated; what we have seen in the past two decades are complex mechanisms and legal conditions allowing ever more intense mutual conditioning between creativity, knowledge, and laws. George Yúdice terms this phenomenon “culture-as-resource,” which he argues is the lynchpin of a new epistemic framework in which culture becomes a site to be invested in by all kinds of interests.35 While this concept has received plenty of academic attention in its usefulness for describing current events, certain critics, such as Peter Osborne, are very critical of it. Osborne argues that the concept of culture-as-resource negates the autonomy of culture from politics, therefore negating also the critical function of metacultural discourse in deploying “culture” against “politics.”36 If culture becomes just a pool of resources for everybody to use, then cultural studies, whose criticality is made possible by the logic of culture, becomes inconceivable.

I agree with Osborne that we cultural critics should hold on to the critical potentiality of culture instead of surrendering it too easily to the epistemic desire of various forces exploiting culture as their own resource. We are seeing many scientific ways of rationalizing and utilizing the creativity potential of culture, not only to maximize profit but also as knowledge to be applied to other realms, so that culture has become a means of “humanizing” both capitalist productivity and political control—often called “cultural turns” in
other fields. The workforce is managed in increasingly flexible ways, wherein concepts of leisure, culture, and interactive human relations are introduced, resulting in at-home workers, domestic-style offices, and flexible work schedules and patterns. Political realms have also been transformed. As I mentioned in the introduction, in Australia and the U.K. reformers in the 1990s defined their new politics in cultural terms, emphasizing consumer interests, cultural opportunities, and community life. Accompanying this “aestheticization of politics” is the rise of a new cultural policy discourse underpinned by a strong IPR rhetoric, so that culture can become an economic tool. Generally speaking, knowledge is packaged with creativity for easier consumption, whereas the presentation of culture is heavily engineered by practical knowledge for marketing and functionalist purposes. A legal regime also arises not only to provide order but also to reinforce a new IPR morality. At the same time, production and consumption mutually invade each other, so that we need a feeling of play at work (the need to “humanize” our working environment) and a feeling of work at play (the need to spend our leisure time productively). Such very personal experiences are made to circulate around the world, and the pursuit of individual pleasure fits well within the general neoliberal milieu. When culture becomes resource, culture also loses all its critical potentiality.

We might ask whether alternatives to such omnipotent structures are possible. Clearly one way of thinking is to follow the modernist movement, which stresses the autonomous space occupied by the field of the aesthetic expressive, in the name of art for art’s sake, to prevent the encroachment of instrumental reasoning into the field of art. However, Habermas has already rightly pointed out the resultant impotence of art in engaging with the social and the political. Another way of thinking is precisely the Habermasian assertion of the integration of the three realms, but such integration runs the risk of turning culture into resource, which supports today’s creative economy. What Habermas ignores in his wish to complete the project of modernity is the tremendous power of the capitalist economy, which is now able to bridge the various realms for the sake of turning a profit.

Here I would like to present a third way of understanding creativity, also within Western philosophy, which casts a new light on the dialectics between control and freedom. In her reading of Giambattista Vico’s classic *The New Science*, Sandra Luft does not treat creativity as unpredictable, but as basic to human nature. Luft argues that models of divine creativity in the Hebraic and Greek traditions were appropriated by different Enlightenment thinkers to form drastically different ways of understanding creativity. Great classical
thinkers such as Galileo, Descartes, and Leibniz followed Plato’s conception of mimesis, but Vico provides a model of the human world that secularizes the Hebraic notion of divine creation to shape people’s worldviews. In Vico’s model there are three distinct conceptions of creativity, which correspond to three generations of being. First, there is the age of the gods, who create. Second, there are the first peoples, the heroes, who respond to the gods’ creation by uttering their first words, with a “corporeal imagination,” an originary language inseparable from deeds and things, out of ignorance and fear. Third, we, the people of “the third age,” have made ourselves subjective beings.39

Luft’s interpretation of this model is characterized by her two main arguments. First, the Hebraic tradition, as documented by Vico, provides a different way to understand the original creative power; Vico’s god is more a creator than a knower. Second, we should not understand Vico’s historical schema as a developmental one, and we must avoid considering the “instrumental” third people to be more advanced than the “poetic” second people. Instead they are connected genetically, so that the people of the third age are also equipped with the poetic ability of the first and second ages: “For Vico the poetic event originates a patterned and recurrent process unfolding genetically through three ages.” Being direct descendants of the first peoples, people of the third age are also creators, and their creativity is never other than that of being in the world. In contrast, the metaphysical tradition that Western modernity inherited from Plato emphasizes humans’ epistemic ability. If Descartes describes the modern subject as the knower, Vico describes him or her as the creator: people can create without knowing. Vico’s tale is a powerful one, breaking the Platonic dichotomy between making as fictive and knowing as real, and it reminds us, according to Luft, that “humans are never other than creators, their reality never other than artifactual and finite, their ‘truths’ never other than fictive.”40 By demonstrating how we came from the first Gentiles, who were poets precisely because they were not knowers, Vico locates the originality of humanity in which we are always ontological beings who creatively respond to what arises in our social historical world.

While in the metaphysical story creativity is subdued in the course of secularization, Vico provides an alternative vision, helping us see a concrete creativity rendered as people’s poetic and vulnerable responses to the world, like the utterance pa to express one’s fear of thunder. This utterance is a recognition of the original poverty of the human condition, and, according to Luft, such “primitive” creativity continues to be embodied in the social practices of modern people. Vico’s model, in which knowledge and subjectivity cannot be separated, also helps us interrogate modernity’s segregation of creativity
into instrumental reasoning and aesthetic sentiments. There is nothing mystical about creativity, and it does not belong only to a select few. Because we are always already creative, and through creativity we express ourselves and connect to other people, there are no grounds for fetishizing creativity.

Vico’s understanding of the intimate relationship between divine creation and human praxis finds an interesting echo in a branch of theological thinking. It is true that the mainstream understanding of creation within Christian studies is of a dichotomy between chaos and order, in which the Christian God creates by providing order. Many of the current mainstream theological studies therefore tread the similar epistemological path of Western modernity. However, even in contemporary theological studies there is a model of divine creation, known as the “serendipity of history,” which complements Vico’s ideas in an odd way. Instead of explaining how human creativities are responses to and results of divine creation, the theologian Gordon D. Kaufman argues just the opposite. He asserts that the common conception of the Christian God is actually drawn from the way people understand human activities. It is mostly our everyday experience of being humans as individual agents in modern Westernized society that shapes the conception of God as Creator: “This conception of God is clearly constructed on the model of the human purposive agent, capable of self-conscious creative work.” Kaufman finds this model a limiting one, polarizing the creator and the created in the mechanism of control and also reinforcing the conception of the self (on the part of the creator) as freestanding and metaphysically self-sufficient. Thus Kaufman demonstrates an alternative model of divine creativity, one which is based not on the notion of sufficient and controlling human agency, but on the complex development patterns of culture, language, and society: “This capacity or feature of history, to produce vastly more than we human inventors and creators and purposes expected or intended is what I call the ‘serendipity of history.’”41 Based on the ways human civilization has unfolded, divine creativity can therefore be seen as an enormous and nonlinear expansion of effects that are not determined by any original intention, although humans fully participate in it. Just as history unfolds in surprising ways, divine creativity also goes in all kinds of directions.

Although Kaufman is concerned not with modernity as such but with the understanding of the Christian God, the predicament he is trying to resolve is relevant to Vico’s project, as he also finds problematic the connection between creativity and the control of human agency. While Vico posits a different understanding of divine creativity in order to provide an alternative conceptualization of our human world, Kaufman suggests that the complex
ways the human world has evolved shed light on our comprehension of divine creativity. Therefore Kaufman’s idea can be understood alongside Vico’s non-epistemological poetic creation. Creativity is not controlled and ordered by some willful agency, but interacts with the subject (divine or human) to mutually define each other.

Most important, Kaufman’s analysis posits that man’s desire to understand God can also be a creative act: either we apply our own instrumentalist desire to God, or we associate God with the serendipity of historical unfolding. In this sense, we can relate creativity not only to production but also to understanding. Introducing the notion of understanding in my framework of “creativity as social practice” is important, because a community cannot be formed without a continuous and complex relation between production and reception, encoding and decoding. The ways creativity functions in culture comprise both that involve making and understanding.

“Creative understanding” is a notion Mikhail Bakhtin has used to refer to the dialogic encounter of people with different cultural backgrounds. In order to understand, a person should be located outside the object of one’s creative understanding, not pretentiously that one has either incorporated the other or forgotten oneself, both ways demonstrate the epistemological desire characterizing western modernity. “Creative understanding does not renounce itself, its own place and time, its own culture; it forgets nothing.”42 This idea of creative understanding is intimately related to his more famous concept of “dialogism,” referring to the many languages at work in a community, making both understanding and diversity possible.43 The two notions link meaning productions and meaning receptions, through which Bakhtin emphasizes the plural expressions produced in a community that do not hinder but in fact contribute to the formation of a community. Bakhtin’s use of the term “creative” is particularly illuminating, and can be related to Kaufman’s model of divine creation. Creation is an act involving not only action but also reaction, and the object of creation will be transformed and re-created by those who receive them creatively. This chain-like model emphasizes the irreducible existence of both oneself and the other: to be creative is to remember that we are not isolated controlling intellects but social beings constantly caught in the intercourse between ourselves and others. Kaufman’s and Bakhtin’s models of creative understanding endorse social intercourse, mutual respect, and the existence of other possibilities, connecting creativity with social praxis.44 This understanding of creative acts is different from the way we have understood Western artistic genius, and the idea that creativity is a matter of social practice can be seen as an effective challenge to both the modernity project and
the creative economy. Both the modernity project and the creative economy celebrate creativity as the making of “new” ideas and products, but only to the extent that creative energy will not exceed the control of human beings. The sense of uncertainty inherent in the new is therefore tamed, and the rich potentiality of creativity is also radically depleted.

In order to critically challenge the instrumental manipulation of creativity, what we need is neither a Habermasian call to render art relevant to society, nor a simple claim of creativity as uncontrollable. Instead we need a more profound understanding of creativity—one that both builds and destroys, one that connects individuals and also points toward one’s own alterity, and one that belongs not only to a few gifted individuals but to all of us. It is our willingness to grant, or simply acknowledge, the full potentiality of creativity that might help us to counter the late capitalist desire for total control. Therefore it is not my aim in this book to dichotomize creative industries and intellectual property rights offenses, whose opposition is largely a discursive construction of the creative economy, but to explain their continuity in relation to creativity’s multifaceted manifestations.