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The art of the good life: culture and sustainable prosperity

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Abstract

The creative economy has seen cultural policy swallowed up by a narrow vision of economic growth, its impacts on the urban fabric captured by property developers, and its promises of meaningful activity challenged by the exploitation and inequities of cultural labour markets. So it needs to be abandoned and re-thought; but on what basis? This paper analyses the potential for cultural work to encourage alternative visions of the 'good life', in particular, how it might encourage a kind of 'sustainable prosperity' wherein human flourishing is not linked to high levels of material consumption but rather the capabilities to engage with cultural and creative practices and communities. We critically explore these ideas in three locations: a London borough, a deindustrialized city in England's midlands, and a rural town on the Welsh/English border. Across these diverse landscapes and socio-economic contexts, we look at different versions of the good life and at the possibilities and constraints of cultural activity as a way of achieving kinds of sustainable prosperity.

Keywords: sustainable prosperity, cultural policy, cultural work

1. Introduction

Debates about the role of culture in society have, for two decades and more, been dominated by the paradigm of the "creative economy." Drawing its original inspiration from "culutral industries" discourses that sought to recognise and develop a critical understanding of the role of markets in, and the political economy of, the production of culture, the idea has morphed from an insight into a dogma (Garnham, 2005). The argument that culture is important to the economy and that the economy helps shape culture, is now less of empirical argument and more of a normative one – culture is important because it is important to economic growth. A far cry from what Garnham and others were arguing in the 1990s. The

creative economy has seen cultural policy swallowed up by a narrow vision of economic growth, its impacts on the urban fabric captured by property developers, and its promises of meaningful activity challenged by the exploitation and inequities of cultural labour markets.

So it needs to be abandoned and re-thought; but on what basis? A return to traditional arts policy – state sponsored, focussed on the nation and on high art – is hopefully unlikely, even in post-Brexit Britain. The culture of everyday life, of ordinary participation and ordinary pleasures is increasingly celebrated (Ebrey, 2016; Gilmore, 2017), but the implications for policy are sometimes unclear and the professional cultural producer is marginal in these discussions. Production and consumption may be increasingly related, though we would argue, contra some digital enthusiasts (Jenkins, 2006), that the distinction has not completely collapsed. We still watch TV and movies, listen to music and look at painting and sculpture, and in so doing the role of the artist and the cultural worker remains an important one.

As part of a five year research project, we want to consider sustainable prosperity – the idea that "people everywhere have the capability to flourish as human beings – within the ecological and resource constraints of a finite planet" (www.cusp.ac.uk; see also, Jackson, 2009) as a way to rethink the notion of the creative economy. What might be the role of the arts and cultural activity in a society where wellbeing is increasingly decoupled from a model of economic growth, and where human flourishing is not linked to high levels of material consumption? We want to consider explicitly the role of culture and the arts, not just in communicating sustainability but also as an inherent component of that sort of society.

We do not however start from the assumption that this role is automatically benign, or that a positive connection between culture and human flourishing is axiomatic. Still less do we buy the argument that cultural production is inherently "green," that it stands in opposition to industrial production, to energy use or to conspicuous consumption. Its role in all these factors is easy to demonstrate, even if it is largely ignored by cultural advocates (Miller,

2017). Our approach to this topic is critical, and in particular asks the question, what does the idea of sustainable prosperity look like in different environments? The idea of the creative economy has been, rightly, criticised for its lack of attention to spatial and social difference, particularly for the promotion of a model based on the urban global north into contexts to which it is ill suited (Waitt & Gibson, 2009; Oakley & O'Connor, 2015). We do not want to replace that with an idea of sustainable prosperity that looks the same everywhere and that ignores local needs, history and socio-economic conditions. Instead we need to understand what these ideas might mean to people in particular contexts.

In order to counter the sometimes "placelessness" or perhaps place insensitivity of the creative economy discourse, we critically explore these ideas in three locations: a London borough, a deindustrialized city in England's midlands, and a rural town on the Welsh/English border. Across these diverse landscapes and socio-economic contexts, we look at different versions of the good life and at the possibilities and constraints of cultural activity as a way of achieving kinds of sustainable prosperity.

2. Policy, culture and sustainability

Cultural policy has traditionally played relatively little attention to questions of the environment, outside of a broad and often very vague concern with "sustainable development," which is generally to be found in literature on "creative" cities or regions. The most sustained attempt to link environmental and cultural concerns within public policy has been so called "fourth pillar" work (Hawkes, 2001), which argues for culture as the fourth pillar of sustainability alongside economic, social and environmental varieties. Under these auspices a range of policy approaches, sometimes referred to as cultural planning or community cultural development, are included. What links them is concern with the local, with citizens' involvement and with policies that bring cultural investments into dialogue

with environmental concerns. In so doing, it tends to move "culture" in an anthropological direction, away from a concern with symbolic goods.

As Evans and Foord note (2008), these approaches, while originating in consultancies and think tanks, have found their way – if very unevenly – into policy and planning, particularly in the global north (Baeker, 2002; Guppy, 1997) as well as via international agencies such as UNESCO and the EU (Duxbury, Hosagrahar & Pascual, 2016). They often proliferate in the form of "handbooks" and toolkits and stress the importance of community consultation in culture-led development, as well as a clear understanding (often described as "mapping") of local cultural assets – such as much-loved record shops, nightclubs or sporting venues, in short the places that communities invest with meaning.

This work undoubtedly provides an alternative to the dominant, economically focused idea of the creative economy. It stresses the importance of non-market goods and exchanges, emphasises the importance of the local and the grounded, and clearly has a vision of social life beyond that of economic growth. But for us it is hampered by a fundamentally apolitical reading of the role of culture in social change. Fourth pillar writers, who are often working in an advocacy tradition, are keen to stress the essential links between social, economic, environmental and cultural dimensions of sustainability, though often less keen to admit the tensions and contradictions between them.

An obvious problem is the vague notion of sustainability that is in use here. As Isar (2017, p. 149) puts it, the policy prescriptions articulated around the term sustainable development "have come to embrace practically every aspect of the human condition." It is clear that the term is enormously malleable and that this created problems for understanding. For example Kong (2009, p. 3) treats environmental sustainability as "the sustainability of urban spaces as valuable repositories of human (personal and social) meaning," while elsewhere, Koefoed (2013, p. 156) suggests an idea of sustainability that not only cuts across the four "pillars" but

also temporality, "evoking the relation between future, present and past choices and options." The tendency to denote all desirable social change as "sustainable" risks stretching the term far away from any notion of living within the material limits of the planet, and indeed beyond almost any sensible meaning.

But our concern in this paper is less to do with the malleability of the term sustainability, problematic though that is, and more to do with the refusal to admit to contradictions between culture and sustainability, even when they are apparent. As Couch and Denneman (2000) point out, culturally-led regeneration and sustainable development have existed as parallel strands within British urban policy in recent decades and, while the reuse of older buildings or attempts at inner-city densification might well have beneficial environmental impacts, the links between both policy strands is rarely explicitly made and trade-offs are rarely acknowledged. In their case study of the Ropewalks culturally-led development in Liverpool they detected little evidence of a commitment to issues such as transport, pollution, energy, waste reduction or recycling, despite a stated commitment to good urban design. Evans and Foord (2008) also note that even cultural planning approaches have tended not to engage with the spatial planning or land use issues, though these are at the heart of the question of power and inequality within the urban environment.

Even where successful, processes of urban regeneration which have led to demographic changes with positive environmental effects – such as middle class pressure for public parks or clear air – also contribute to the inequality that undermines any sort of real sustainability. For example, in Mexico City regeneration attracted the creative class to part of the city, while leaving other, less favoured parts of the city even less environmentally habitable for their poorer inhabitants (Dieleman, 2013). The links between culturally-led developments and gentrification are well evidenced (Oakley, 2014) and we do not have space to rehearse these arguments here. The point is simply that there can be no assumed beneficial relationship

between culturally-led developments on one hand and increased environmental sustainability on the other.

This argument is echoed by Duxbury, Kangas and De Beukelaer (2017) who acknowledge that contradictions exist but argue that cultural policy can make a contribution to genuine environmental sustainability in four ways: through sustaining particular practices and rites, particularly those of indigenous people; through greening the practices of cultural organizations themselves; by using arts to raise awareness of environmental issues, and; by fostering something called global "ecological citizenship" (p. 224). Isar too (2017), having rightly criticized the incoherence of much "culture and sustainability" discourse, suggests a narrower focus for cultural policy, particularly around issues of climate change. Again he suggests paying attention to the energy use of cultural buildings and institutions alongside a more direct addressing of these issues by artists and cultural organisations. Such contributions usefully tease out the complexity of the role of culture in sustainability, however, they tend to call for interventions that are hard to disagree with but which are also either vague or too "small."

Our own research in this area is at an early stage and far from policy prescriptions as such, but we believe it is important to pay attention to how these tensions and contradictions are experienced on the ground, by those working in the arts. Rather than moving the debate beyond "merely national or regional interest," as Duxbury et al. argue (2017, p. 224), it seems crucial to engage with how these discourses touch down in different socio economic conditions and how that shapes the possibility of changes.

3. Local contexts

In order to try and understand what the role of culture might be in sustainable prosperity we carried out interviews with local cultural producers in three different – indeed wildly different

– contexts. These were Hay-on-Wye, a small town in Wales on the border with the English county of Herefordshire; Stoke-on-Trent, a medium sized city in the West Midlands, and; Islington, a north London borough. These sites were selected to offer distinct contexts, ranging from the hyper gentrification and hyper inequality of inner London, through the pessimism and opportunity that stand in tension in a deindustrialised city, to the rural good life and its sometimes harsh realities.

We will be basing almost all of the research in the coming years in these locations, and will be looking at young people who want to work in the cultural sectors and at the role of culture in everyday life in these contexts. But first we wanted to understand what cultural labour in these locations might mean: how these might be spaces that provide for different visions of, and challenges to, sustainable prosperity. We conducted 28 semi-structured interviews (Stoke: 8; Islington: 9; Hay: 10) which lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. Participants were all freelance or self-employed workers who, in at least one of their roles, were directly involved in the production of some kind of cultural product. The sample included individuals working in journalism, visual arts, ceramics, photography, film production, dance and community arts, and they were at a range of career stages, from new graduates through to established workers with national or international reputations. Self-employed workers were selected as the tensions between what might be viewed as the desirable aspects of cultural work – e.g. autonomy, involvement – and the potential downsides – e.g. insecurity, overwork – would be most apparent. Potential participants were identified through preliminary visits to the field, creative directories and web searches, as well as through snowball sampling. Of all the areas in which the politics of culture has sharpened in recent years, labour is perhaps at the forefront, as a host of concern about exploitation and exclusion have produced a far more complex picture of the work that animates much cultural advocacy (Banks, 2017). This sample cannot present a generalizable picture, however, it does capture empirical data from

workers in a range of different situations that can add to debates around cultural labour and sustainability.

Hay-on-Wye

Hay-on-Wye ("Hay") is a small market town (population was just 1,598 in 2011) located on the north eastern edge of the Brecon Beacons in Wales. Overall, the town's residents tends to be older than the Welsh average, it has significantly higher levels of self-employment and large numbers of incomers, 58% of its population was born in England, against 21% for Wales overall.[2] It is also one of the least deprived areas in Wales.

Hay is perhaps best known as the "Town of Books." This reputation developed due to the work of Richard Booth, who opened his bookshop there in 1962, and more recently, through the Hay Festival of Literature & Arts, which has run since 1988. The Financial Times (Cox, 2016) notes that the festival has helped to "transform Hay from a struggling rural outpost into the Welsh answer to Notting Hill." The article points out that houses in Hay have increased in value by 9%, compared to 1% for Powys overall, but that it still boasts "bargain property" making the town attractive to second-home owners who "comprise the relatively, rather than the very, wealthy."

Assessing the size of the cultural sector in Hay is difficult – due to its reputation it is the hub for a population of cultural participants, producers and businesses located not just in the town, but dispersed through the surrounding area. For example, the Town Council's "Welcome to Hay-on-Wye" website includes details of Erwood Station Gallery, located some 22 miles from the town, while The Hay Makers cooperative gallery includes artists from neighbouring villages in Powys and Herefordshire.

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2 Local authority and neighbourhood statistics here and elsewhere are drawn from 2011 Census data available from the Office for National Statistics via nomisweb.co.uk

Stoke-on-Trent

The English city of Stoke-on-Trent in the West Midlands has a population of 249,008. The city is comprised of six towns – each historically separate, but federated in 1910 and granted city status in 1925. The towns were centres of ceramics production – home to major brands, including Wedgewood, Royal Doulton and Spode. During the nineteenth century they produced 70 per cent of global ceramic exports, employing 100,000 people at their peak, as well as being home to mining and steel production industries (West, 2016, p. 5). The city is still known as The Potteries, though employment in the ceramics sector is now less than 10,000. Coal mining and steel production have ceased completely.

Jayne (2004, p. 200) points out that ceramics production has "imposed a distinctive landscape and a seemingly indelible identity onto the region," which, he argues, has made it difficult to develop "the economy, infrastructure, social structures, atmospheres, and spaces and places associated with more successful post-industrial cities." This is compounded by the city's polycentrism: balkanisation and inter-town competition means there is a lack of strategic focus on where to focus regeneration efforts (West, 2016, p. 27). The city has high levels of employment in routine and manual occupations and very low levels of higher managerial, administrative and professional occupation. Almost a third of its districts are within the 10% most deprived in England.

The city has previously undertaken several culture-led regeneration programmes and is currently bidding to be UK City of Culture 2021, in part an attempt to change how the city is perceived. Indeed, as an editorial in the local daily newspaper – The Sentinel – put it, national media coverage unfairly presents the city as a "post-industrial moonscape inhabited by

Neanderthals," (Woodhouse, 2017), an allegation that some media have conceded has merit[3].

[Tables 1 & 2 around here]

Islington, London

At the 2011 Census, the London borough of Islington had a population of 206,125, spread from Finsbury, on the edge of the City of London in the south, to Archway and Finsbury Park in the north.

For sections of the popular media, Islington is the centre of a "metropolitan elite," a spiritual home to the former New Labour government and a byword for all that is liberal and cosmopolitan. However, it is also the 26th most deprived local authority in England, marked by stark inequalities and social polarisation between groups depending on income levels, occupations, housing type and educational achievement (New Economics Foundation [NEF], 2013). House prices are a key factor, Islington is unaffordable to many people on low and middle incomes who are unable to access oversubscribed social housing and for who the jump in price to the private sector is too steep, thus "hollowing out" the middle. Census data suggest that those in higher managerial and professional jobs at one end and the long term unemployed at the other are significantly overrepresented. A NEF report suggests that people in Islington live:

> very different and separate lives… largely shaped by how affluent people are. This in turn leads to a range of social issues, or consequences of

3 The BBC and The Guardian recognised that their coverage was overly negative. BBC Radio 4's Today programme has since run a series of items on positive stories about the towns, and in April 2017 The Guardian began a project to present locals' views of the city.

> inequality, including: a lack of understanding between people; a fear of 'other' groups; social alienation; feelings of powerlessness; and status anxiety. (NEF, 2013, p. 31)

The inequalities in the borough are perhaps illustrated by a small section of Caledonian Road which runs north from Kings Cross towards Finsbury Park, and which features the notorious Bemerton Estate directly opposite Barnsbury, a highly affluent neighbourhood of "super-gentrifiers" (Butler & Lees, 2006).

4. Living and working

As can be seen, our three sites offer different resources for, and challenges to, sustainable prosperity, as well as different visions of what "prosperity" – the good life – might look like. In talking to cultural workers in these areas some sense of the tensions within and between places arises.

In Hay, somewhat unsurprisingly, the escape-to-the-country – a kind of lifestyle migration (O'Reilly & Benson, 2009) – was a common theme, drawing workers from around the UK to settle and work there. For many the draw was not simply to a rural idyll, rather Hay offers a small town set within beautiful landscape that also has links to "cosmopolitan" arts and culture. Hay is "far enough away to start again, reinvent yourself. But not so far away you're going to be surrounded by farmers that have never read," as one interviewee put it, though also inadvertently flagging up some of the tensions between ostensibly urbane incomers and their local counterparts (see below). The Hay Festival plays an important part in developing the cosmopolitan milieu, not just for its annual run but also in establishing the town's reputation as somewhere cultural producers and consumers might find appealing. Two respondents moved specifically to work for the festival, and it featured in most other accounts.

However, the reality of Hay does not always match expectations. One respondent, originally from Hay, had been persuaded to return to the town while expecting her first child. Hay could provide an idyllic landscape in which to bring up children. For Siobhan, however, this was the "fantasy scenario" that draws people in, and which is perpetuated by a small fraction of people, namely those who don't have to make money:

> But what we soon realised was that although Hay seemed quite lively and that there's a lot of businesses and people there there's a huge proportion of those businesses that aren't economically viable. There's a huge amount of people who are basically creating this fantasy scenario of an economically booming place because they don't actually have to make any money.

She suggest that this created not just economic problems, but also social tensions – that within certain social groups needing to make money was anathema, as it would break a particular fantasy of country life. The anti-commercial ethos associated with art work can here become a class barrier, excluding those (the majority) for whom paid work is necessary for survival.

Another respondent, Jenny, notes that while Hay "is a fabulous place for arts and crafts," it does not simply follow that people are making much money from it. Jenny and her husband Edward – who live just outside Hay – also highlight the attraction of Hay as a place to raise children. They moved to the town from North Wales, originally to work in education, but the reality of full time jobs meant that their move was "a false promise" (Jenny) as work demanded long hours, and most of their money was spent on childcare and travel. They were able to establish a small business selling handmade craft materials online, which is now their main income, turnover expanding from a few hundred pounds a month to "four or five thousand" within a short amount of time. Despite the rapid growth of the business, its

viability as their sole income has been dependent on significant reductions in their expenditure. But they have also been clear in their aim and strategic in reaching it: their primary concern is being able to provide full time childcare for their two young children and have time to enjoy their (rented) house and the surrounding countryside. To that end, they have positioned themselves as selling a "luxury" product, this means they need to produce only small quantities, also allowing them to work from home:

> We do this as a luxury brand because then we don't have to do as much. The whole idea is to spend time with our family. To be here. To appreciate everything around us. (Edward)

This follows a tradition of small-scale craft enterprise where high quality work is inherently linked to the rural, where workers can pursue a "simple life" somewhat relieved from the economic pressures of the city (Luckman, 2012, p. 76–77). However, Edward notes that they would not be able to afford to purchase a house in the area, citing waves of incomers who are able to sell a small house in London and use the proceeds to buy a larger property around Hay, and that the town is becoming "overrun with people like that." Oliver Balch (2016) – an author who lives in a Welsh village just outside Hay – sketches some of these fault lines in his account of life in and around the town. A population of "locals," with longstanding links to the town and often involved in agriculture or related industries, stand in contrast to waves of incomers – themselves divided between those attracted by Hay's "Boothian nonconformity" (p. 261) as the cornerstone of a way-of-life, and those for whom such quirks are merely the backdrop that "adorns their move-to-the-Marches story" (p. 262).

Particularly in Jenny and Edward's narrative, we might see how cultural work can offer a template for a version of sustainable prosperity. They emphasise a business model and lifestyle of small scale production and minimal levels of consumption as they pursue the good life. However, we would call attention to its highly individualised framing – both noting that

they alone are “uniquely responsible” for their success or failure. Further, while they have adopted a lifestyle of minimal consumption, their products are promoted through that lifestyle – they offer the opportunity to purchase a bit of the good life – and thus tie themselves into the very circuits of materialism and consumerism they have apparently opted out of. Thus, as Luckman (2012, p. 162) observes, the desirability of individuality and its realisability through consumption remains intact. Indeed, Jenny notes that a proportion of their product is bought not to be used in crafting but by individuals who just want a larger collection of more diverse, colourful, luxurious types, and that “they spend a lot of money,” just to keep it on shelves: it is “a bit like buying shoes.”

In contrast to Hay, Stoke-on-Trent’s has a strongly negative reputation, even among long-time residents. One respondent notes that it is perceived as a place where “nothing is going on.” Another forcefully demonstrated how poorly it is perceived, noting that he thinks “it’s a fucking dump really […] It’s ugly. It’s culturally deprived.” It is perhaps difficult to imagine a good life in such a place, moreover Stoke’s reputation is not just about how people view the city, but affects what some local people view as possible in the towns and the kind of life they might lead. Michelle notes that while in school she aspired to work in fashion, but at the time there she felt that “I’m from Stoke I can’t be in the creative arts.” Respondents told us that while growing up in the city, even as the significance of ceramics and mining industries diminished, there persisted the idea that work would always be found in “pots or pits.” Moreover, Ben felt that even where there was arts activity it was trapped by the city’s heritage: “that any shows or exhibitions, anything cultural that goes on in Stoke-on-Trent, they almost always link it back to the potteries. It becomes a bit tiring after a while.” Here, then, place reputation, its history and heritage, impinges on individual’s capability to imagine participating in particular kinds of work.

For others however, that heritage offers potential. Helen compares working as an artist in

Stoke to her experiences of larger cities: “I never felt the same kind of excitement up [in Manchester] because I felt it had already been done. Twenty years ago artists were colonising buildings and putting on cheap shows […] It’s gone past that, lost a bit of that energy.” She describes Stoke as “malleable,” saying that there are few barriers to artists occupying spaces around the city and they have the “leeway” to produce interesting things. Even though she describes Burslam as “completely barren,” with a “problem with on street drinking,” she also thinks that it is a “lovely town… there’s loads of potential.” Marie has a sense that among creative workers there is increased optimism about what Stoke can provide for them, whereas she was “sick” of artists “posting pictures of where houses are falling down” she feels that now:

> We’ve come past all that. They’ve started to say we’re worth [something], we need shouting about […] People are wanting to stay because of that buzz.

Another respondent, who was driven out of Hay by high house prices, is now a “massive advocate” for Stoke. Siobhan had to overcome her own perceptions of the city, largely informed by its “terrible reputation.” Yet for her, Stoke delivers on the kinds of promises that Hay made: Stoke affords her access to space, funding and inspiration, and is somewhere that, despite its industrial image, “is completely surround by fields and countryside.” She notes that peers based in London are perplexed by the amount of space she has, and her access to Arts Council England funding, which she believes is “because I’m in Stoke!” Further, that “there’s loads of […] people whose voices have not been heard and stories have not been told [and] interesting communities to work with.”

Several respondents, then, were concerned with changing attitudes towards the city and emphasising the towns’ potential. This accords with research elsewhere that notes the attraction of “raw” places that are viewed as sites of “unrealised potential” (Ward, 2016).

Creative workers in Stoke can take advantage of the city's material and symbolic resources to construct their version of the good life, one in which economic pressures are reduced and where they play an active and prominent part in shaping a vision for the city.

Understanding Stoke as an "unmade" place stands in contrast to Islington which, like much of inner London, is undergoing waves of (hyper-)gentrification. In the 1970s and 1980s Islington could be viewed as a relatively edgy and culturally "interesting" part of the city, in particular the area around Islington Green at Angel. Recently, however, parts of Islington have not had the cultural credibility of, for example, Shoreditch in Hackney and elsewhere in London's East End. Today, as Patrick points out, Islington is largely typified, in reputation at least, by Upper Street – a somewhat staid and very middle class road of shops and restaurants that runs from Angel to Highbury & Islington. Helen points to the increasing numbers of highly paid workers in the area who appear to be scared of where they live and are detached from the daily life of the communities in which they reside:

> Once you start paying 300k a bedroom you suddenly start getting nervous of people around you. I don't know why. Maybe because you haven't got time to talk to people. By not talking to people, by sending your child to a private school, by having pick up nannies who take them off when they are little, you never see anyone.

Of course these processes are proceeding unevenly. Sitting in a distinctly un-trendy, un-gentrified café on Caledonian Road, one participant notes its decline as a local "high street," as marked by the departure of well-known chains:

> The things that have gone from this street. There was a Woolworths, a Booth's, an old Co-op, a Tesco's, Barclays Bank and a quite good sub post office. All that's left is the sub post office and the Co-op returned after the

Tesco's left. (David)

Other participants suggest that gentrification in Islington has not proceeded in the same ways, or with the same speed, as it did in neighbouring areas such as Hackney. However, it remains a significant issue and they note its effects on communities and the viability of the borough as a place to live, socialise and work. The rising cost of living means that cultural workers are under intense pressure from the very beginning of their careers to make money. While Claire is now a moderately successful artist it took 15 years from graduation to reach that stage, she suggests that she would find it much more difficult to do this if graduating today, primarily because of housing costs, noting that people "need time, to bed into their work, but they don't get it now. I was lucky." Additionally, several respondents noted that they felt priced out of professional networks; by the costs associated with informal socialising and of joining formal associations. The difficulty of accessing creative networks is exacerbated by increasing levels of competition among creative workers: while London remains a major global centre for cultural production and consumption, Sarah suggests that from the mid-1990s on the arts scene became less open, less discursive, and more competitive. Monica similarly notes that because she did not train at a London stage school she had significant trouble getting performing jobs in the city as she competed with similarly qualified and experienced performers who were already "insiders." As freelance/self-employed workers who rely on establishing and maintaining professional contacts, this can have implications for the sustainability of their careers as they are excluded from opportunities (see Easton & Cauldwell-French, 2017; Oakley, Laurison, O'Brien & Friedman, 2017).

David, now a successful visual artist in his late 60s, has been a resident of Islington for over 40 years. He is perhaps best placed to take advantage of the borough as he bought his house and studio in the early 1970s, at a time when London was "at the edge of being feral." He notes that at this time he and a group of other artists considered buying the building that

would become the Almeida Theatre for use as studios, it was then being sold for £30,000; a one bed flat on the same street sold for over £650,000 in late 2016. However, he further suggests that while he was relatively advantaged to be in a position to make these purchases it was not entirely extravagant: "but this isn't, 'darling, we bought a loft.' None of that. It's sort of – it's at the end of eking, I think." It also was not a strategic purchase, rather today he reflects on the "privileged ignorance of the act." This compares with the experiences of other respondents living in the borough where they report various kinds of precarious living arrangements, including tiny flats, or the insecurity of being a "property guardian."[4]

If we understand cultural work as offering a version of the "good life" then undertaking such careers in Islington poses several problems: its economic and social sustainability is, for many, highly questionable as high costs of living and intense competition exclude them. However, for several respondents Islington's attraction lies in its diversity and cosmopolitanism, which still exist despite the encroaching threat of gentrification. While Helen felt excluded from creative networks by the increasing affluence of the borough, she also described how Islington still provides a "very local" community of which she can be part. Moreover, her work gains meaning, importance and purpose as she documents the "last hurrah" of a middle-class bohemian Islington, and that through her journalism she is able to document the diversity of a borough that is often derided as being home to a homogeneous "metropolitan elite." For Sarah, being based in a North London park means she is in a super-diverse area with more than 100 languages spoken within a mile of her gallery, which is also able to attract a broad range of people from across the social spectrum. She is proud that, despite over 60% of visitors being frequent gallery-goers, nearly 20% are attending a gallery

4 Property guardians live in vacant buildings (often offices, old fire stations or community centres etc.) to prevent vandalism/squatting. Tenants have highly subsidised rents, but properties are on short-term and insecure contracts.

or museum for the first time that year.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Even from these short extracts, we can see how the tensions and negotiations of cultural life and work are played out in local economies. We can also begin to see how difficult it will be to transition to a more sustainable prosperity in the light of existing inequalities and how versions of the "good life" might reproduce, even promote models of unsustainable practices in which culture cannot stand aside, as it is fully implicated.

Hay-on-Wye perhaps confirms most closely to some sort of agreed idea of the good life. It offers a beautiful rural setting with an active cultural life, but at a cost. The cost, we might suggest is not only financial in terms of high house prices, but in cultivating a particular notion of the good life – one where the need to make a living is frowned upon and low levels of local consumption are funded by the sale of luxury goods elsewhere. Stoke-on-Trent offers potential in terms of cheap accommodation and space to expand, but if its model of cultural regeneration follows the creative economy script, it can only succeed on those terms by raising property prices and appealing to middle class incomers. Gentrification may be some way off, indeed some might argue that limited gentrification is what is needed it Stoke – a version of the good life which offers "less stuff" to poor people is unlikely to be embraced – but "limited gentrification," is notoriously difficult to achieve, the current script offers only division and polarisation. Inner London retains huge cultural power – and via the media still shapes the UK's notion of itself in many ways – but it's not a habitat for cultural workers any more. Those that remain bought in early or exist on the fringes of residential precarity or parental subsidy. Some Islington residents may conform to Duxbury et al.'s plea (2017) for a cosmopolitan, ecological citizenship, but they do so from an environment which is unsustainable on its own local terms.

So how do we rethink this? What might be a starting point for a vision of culture in sustainable prosperity? Firstly, as we have noted but believe cannot be noted enough, there is no inherently beneficial relationship between culturally-led developments and wider social benefits, simply prescribing "more culture" is not an answer. Cultural labour markets are becoming socially narrower (O'Brien, Laurison, Miles & Friedman, 2016) – highly indebted higher education models are not helping – and without a change in both it is hard to see the liberatory potential of culture, the sense of being able to imagine another way of doing things, can ever be realised. So part of the solution may lie in recognising that cultural workers are often part of the problem and starting from there. As Taylor and O'Brien noted recently (2017), meritocratic discourses are often used to justify inequalities particularly by those who are best paid and most successful. The critical lens which those in the arts are trained to turn on society needs also to be turned on the self.

Secondly, as the Hay example in particular reminds us, we need to challenge the notion of what is and what is not "economic" and thus attempt to redraw the lines between waged/ unwaged, productive and reproductive labour. A rentier economy of those who do not need to make any money from their labour is not the basis of an equitable settlement, but the link between work and income must be and is being rethought and while we do not argue for a privileged position for cultural workers within any debates about universal basic income, the precarity of paid work in the cultural economy is one more indicator of how the current system is broken.

Thirdly and perhaps obviously, visions of the good life will differ and we need to take these into account – place matters. It is not enough to say that making Stoke richer and Islington poorer would "balance" the UK, not least given local inequalities within London; inequality within localities is what is tearing them apart. Many of the cultural workers we spoke to, all felt in some way "apart" from their localities – as incomers or migrants, as middle class

professionals or “arty” types, as bohemians in a world turning its back on bohemia.

The last twenty years of neoliberal cultural policies (Hesmondlagh, Nisbett, Oakley & Lee, 2014), have seen the cultural sector become more and more implicated in processes of exclusion and inequality even as many artists have suffered from the same processes, and those in these sectors continue to identify themselves as progressives (Taylor & O’Brien, 2017). The harmonious marriage between high growth capitalism and culture is broken, much as our economic model is broken, though public policy continues to push both (Bazalgette, 2017). The growth in cultural labour organising (de Peuter & Cohen, 2015) and anti-gentrification activities on the parts of artists suggest a re-discovery of oppositional politics that will need to be built on if the good life is to become a reality.

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7. Tables

Table 1: % Usual Residents Aged 16 to 74 in NS-SeC Categories (derived from Census 2011 data)					
	Islington	Stoke	Hay	England	Wales
Higher managerial, administrative and professional	61.9	23.8	35.2	41.7	35.2
Intermediate occupations	15.8	18.8	30.9	22.2	21.4
Routine and manual occupations	18.6	45.8	33.9	31.9	36.9
Never Worked and Long-Term Unemployed	8.6	7.2	3.1	5.6	5.4

Table 2: Analysis showing the count, employment and turnover (£000`s) of VAT and/or PAYE based Enterprises in Stoke-on-Trent and Islington involved in Creative Industries (March 2016 data from ONS releases AH038+AH056)			
	Count	Employment	Turnover
Stoke-on-Trent			
Advertising & Marketing	30	117	7,210
Architecture	5	..C	..C
Crafts	5	..C	..C
Design Product Graphic and Fashion Design	20	31	1,925
Film TV Video Radio and Photography	15	282	7,514
IT Software and Computer Services	165	..C	..C
Publishing	10	49	2,596
Museums Galleries and Libraries	0	0	0
Music Performing and Visual Arts	20	71	3,033
Total	270	1,111	237,329
Islington			
Advertising & Marketing	635	7,035	1,937,557
Architecture	340	4,011	361,008
Crafts	35	109	17,729
Design Product Graphic and Fashion Design	470	2,023	239,709
Film TV Video Radio and Photography	975	4,026	..C
IT Software and Computer Services	1,635	7,315	..C
Publishing	260	4,409	..C
Museums Galleries and Libraries	15	128	14,122
Music Performing and Visual Arts	825	2,779	361,937
Total	5,190	31,835	5,071,720

..c = data removed to avoid disclosure