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Cultural Trends

Creative Economy, Critical Perspectives

Professor Kate Oakley (University of Glasgow) and Dr. Jonathan Ward (University of Leeds)

From the late 1980s, the creative economy became paradigmatic in cultural policy, achieving the status of a powerful global discourse across a range of domains (e.g. Duxbury et al. 2016; UNESCO 2013). At the same time, the discourse and the policy prescriptions that often flow from it have been widely critiqued by academics (Belfiore, 2016; O'Connor 2016; Oakley, O'Brien & Lee, 2013) and often resisted by those in the arts and cultural industries. The association of the creative economy with gentrification and rising property prices, with exploitative working conditions and enhanced inequalities, has migrated from academia and activist circles to policymakers and the media. In some cases – particularly larger/more prominent urban centres – the fashion for such activity has been diminished by its overexposure, questionable returns on investment, political reorganisation and the economic hardships imposed by the financial crisis.

Yet the creative economy has persisted. In the UK the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) have just launched a large programme committed to a 'creative revolution,' supported by tie ups between universities and corporations, and it is part of economic policymaking in a variety of national contexts and in bodies such as the EU and the UN. Meanwhile, the increasing prominence of craft production and alternative models of working and funding has reinvigorated debates around the creative economy, highlighting continuities while also prompting a reassessment of its organisation, practices and politics.

In this Special Issue, some thirty years after John Myerscough asserted *The Economic Importance of the Arts in Britain* (1988) we explore the ways in which the idea of creative economy might be rethought. The rationale for the creative economy, underpinned by Myerscough's work, has reached its limits. Faced with critical environmental concerns, and increasing demands for justice in the ways we produce, consume and experience culture, it is vital that we now explore possible critical paths for its future.

Essential to the creative economy is its ability to entice and sustain a highly skilled workforce. Using data from a major project on craft work in Australia, Susan Luckman considers how the creative economy persists even as its many workers face precarious working conditions. Luckman explores the allure of

creative entrepreneurialism, in particular, how the creative economy script is not rejected but reimagined. Luckman points to the ways in which *some* craftspeople are able “resist—generally from positions of class and racial privilege—the entrepreneurial imperatives otherwise presumed of idealised neoliberal subjects” (p. XXX). She concludes that models for reimagining capitalism exist, but the key issue is how to bring them into the mainstream.

Universities are a primary site in developing the creative economy workforce and, as Moreton highlights, these institutions have bought into much creative economy rhetoric and, moreover, propagate “particular constructions of the idea at the level of policy and everyday practice” (p. XXX). Moreton, carefully excavates how universities reproduce an unequal and instrumental vision of culture and creativity through their ‘third mission’ activity. Here, then there are important questions about how universities can help to create an alternative vision of creative economy where ethical values are foregrounded.

In their paper, Frenette, Martin and Tepper point to the prevalence of multi-disciplinary arts practices as a way in which arts graduates navigate labour markets where high barriers to entry and poor working conditions are the norm. Working across disciplines leads to increased levels of job satisfaction and is associated with those who stay in the arts long after graduation. However, they crucially point out that these experiences are different for different groups, with non-white graduates working across artforms because of scarcity whereas others, such as men, “may do so as a response to a wealth of opportunities” (p. XXX). While the creative economy may rely on multi-disciplinary working, ensuring that it is experienced evenly and fairly remains far from fulfilled.

Lithgow and Wall forward a Deleuzian analysis towards an artist-in-residency at a cemetery in Edmonton, Canada, a residency constituted to meet the neoliberal efficiencies of a municipal creative economy script. Rather than simply reproduce this script they point to the ways in which the programme, through aesthetic experience, was able to short-circuit “machinery of neoliberal urban and economic development” (p. XXX). Here, then, they remind us that while the logics of the creative economy persists they are not totalising.

Finally, Mark Banks makes a case against growth. In his paper Banks questions this imperative of the creative economy script, highlighting three key issues that suggest it is social and environmentally unsustainable. Banks then forwards arguments for alternative visions for new creative economy imaginaries, approaches “that recognise the limits to growth and its failings as a foundation for collective progress and well-being” (p. XXX). Vital are approaches which

address issues of unequal distribution, environmental unsustainability and the creative economy's failure of the cultural imagination.

Across these papers, common themes emerge that present critical perspectives on the creative economy. There is a desire to reimagine what the creative economy can be if the benefits of good work are experienced evenly, and if the focus shifts from economic growth to foreground ethics, awareness of environmental limits, and a reinvigorated concern for the multiple values of culture.

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