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The creative economy: invention of a global orthodoxy

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This essay considers how policy thinking about culture has been steadily transformed into an overwhelmingly economic subject matter whose central trope is the “creative economy”. The development of current ideas and their background are discussed. Policy ideas first fully developed in the UK have had a global resonance: the illustrative examples of the European Union and the United Nations are discussed. The embedding of creative economy thinking in British cultural institutions such as the BBC and cultural support bodies is illustrated. The impact of current orthodoxy on academic institutions and research is also considered. Countervailing trends are weak. New thinking is now required.

Keywords: BBC; creative economy; cultural policy; discourse; European Union; intermediaries; United Nations

Introduction

In reflections on different forms of academic writing, the philosopher Vilém Flusser (2002, 194) remarked that the “essay is not merely the articulation of a thought, but of a thought as a point of departure for a committed existence”. The virtues of this particular style of expression greatly appeal to me for present purposes, which involve the somewhat dogged pursuit of an argument because it matters greatly. Flusser counter-posed this style of argument to what he called the “academicism” of the treatise, which claimed the qualities of rigour and detachment. Were he one of our contemporaries writing about the creative economy, he would probably inveigh against the fetishism of “evidence-led policy”, which has been key to the discourse I shall describe here.

This piece is less essayistic than I would wish. It pays obeisance to the need to document the case in ways that befit this 30th anniversary contribution to *Innovation* and naturally, it must be referenced, as the detail will be unfamiliar to many readers. The slightly polemical tone is a necessary antidote to scholasticism and mealy-mouthed approval. I have been increasingly struck by how difficult it is *not* to talk approvingly and largely uncritically about the “creative industries” and the “creative economy”. These tropes presently dominate policy debate and media discussion about culture. This discursive dominance has become both a conceptual and practical obstacle to thinking afresh and in the round about culture and the complexity of cultural work in the digital age. In short, I

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would contend that the idea of the creative economy has increasingly obscured and crowded out conceptions of culture that are not in some way subordinate to economic considerations. Intelligent policy-makers and smart government advisers know that this is so and that their evidence rests on uncertain ground – at least, that is what they tell me privately. What figures in such conversations does not, on the whole, enter the public domain because the expedient argument that turns culture into economic value is seen as the only really comprehensible and sellable formula in our times. That is one of my conclusions from empirical research on and engagement in this topic.

The cultural analyst, George Yúdice, has described how a particular version of what he terms the “expediency of culture” has come to dominate public discourse and key institutions, both global and national. The state’s interest in culture, he argues, is presently legitimized by instrumental and utilitarian arguments. First, he contends, this is due to the scale of migration in a globalized world: this has rendered problematic “the use of culture as a national expedient” through which a common value system for a citizenry might be built. Second, he suggests that in the USA the end of Cold War ideological competition led to the withdrawal of much public subvention for the arts. A rapid shift ensued to “an expanded conception of culture that can solve problems, including job creation. ... Because almost all actors in the cultural sphere have latched onto this strategy, culture is no longer experienced, valued, or understood as transcendent”. This means that “artists are being channeled to manage the social” and have become the focus of a specialized couche of “managerial professionals” (Yúdice 2003, 11–12).¹

That expert grouping includes not only cultural bureaucrats but also academics, as I can testify. Over the past couple of decades, I have been deeply involved, over considerable periods of time, as a board member or adviser in the work of several bodies in the UK concerned with culture and media.² That experience has reinforced my view that in the field of cultural policy the pragmatic adaptation to ruling ideas – conformity often without conviction, if you like – is a functional and highly serviceable equivalent to committed belief.

Because this article is anatomizing a resilient ideology, in all probability it will be cited by similar-minded critics but ignored where it really counts – namely, by those with the greatest power to frame strategies and practices in cultural policy. That is an observation and certainly not a complaint, as we can and do make choices about the spaces we occupy in an “intellectual field” – to use Pierre Bourdieu’s phrase – and these decisions duly shape the strategies that we then pursue. As with earlier pieces that I have written on this theme (Schlesinger 2007, 2009, 2013), I know that the central argument will bounce off the resilient carapace of creative economy adherents’ belief system. The same may be said for the related work of like-minded critical colleagues internationally (Bustamante 2011). There is indeed a “counter-discourse” (Vötsch and Weiskopf 2009) that critiques the assumptions and blind spots of creative economy thinking but although of analytical importance, this has not influenced the juggernaut’s seemingly inexorable progress. To be ignored in these matters, then, perhaps confers a perverse badge of honour. It is not that interested and contending parties cannot quite politely and even amiably discuss their different perspectives. It is, rather, that when it comes to the public projection of argument and analysis, there is no great meeting of minds. Rather, there is an increasing tendency for contending views to become self-sustaining and self-contained.

This is not the place for a detailed deconstruction of the different forms of discourse that substantiate these contentions. In an imperfectly realized essay such as this, one may let the contention stand and offer passing illustration rather than seek to provide exhaustive demonstration. If we take recent academic compilations of work in the field as an indication of the existence of different camps gathered under distinct conceptual

banners, these offer a useful marker of, for instance, the divergence between advocates of the “creative economy” and proponents of the “cultural economy” (Jones, Lorenzen, and Sapsed 2015; Oakley and O’Connor 2015). For the latter, rallying round this term may offer an alternative starting point for those opposed to the economization of culture.

The politics of recent discourse

The origins of the discourse of the creative economy are indeed political, *sensu stricto*, because it is positions taken by governments that have most often have been the prime movers of this kind of perspective. Given its reproductive character, much of the discourse itself falls into another specific, subordinate, category, namely the expert domain of policy-making and practical implementation (Maasen and Weingart 2005).

Both official and expert discourses that find their way into reports, parliamentary debate and academic works in the cultural field are commonly recycled rather uncritically by media reports, taken seriously by not a few academics seeking funding, and most consequentially, become embedded in the practice of intermediary bodies acting in, and on, the cultural field. This incorporation into thought and practice takes place at various, interconnected, levels of the global system: in world bodies such as the United Nations (notably, UNESCO); inside regional entities such as the European Union (EU); and, of course, within states.

To understand how a particular form of political discourse is fashioned and disseminated, we need to explain its conditions of existence – in particular, the agency of the producers, the material and symbolic means at their disposal and the interests that they pursue. We may think of such discourses as situated within intellectual fields that are constituted as spaces of contestation: loci in which strategies are pursued by given groups and individuals by way of contention in argument, the provision of evidence and the fashioning of symbolic representations, and also in respect of fierce competition for public attention and the quest to secure positions of influence in government and public bodies.

What Bourdieu (1993) calls the “cycle of consecration” – the development of reputation, if you like – is quite distinctive when it comes to selling policy. It is different, for instance, from creating demand for an artwork or artist. Rather, it is a matter of flooding the market with an ideology so as to crowd out or marginalize alternatives. To establish and defend such symbolic capital requires continual effort in securing the dominance of a given set of definitions. It is the need for such continuous action to secure definitional advantage that explains the repetitive (if continually modified) discursive production in the field.

If the struggle to command attention and, with it, the desire to occupy the commanding heights of credibility, is central to the pursuit of argument in the politics of policy, the distribution of resources to prepare discursive strategies is of key importance in how well it equips antagonists to perform in the public domain.

The structural advantage in framing policies often (but not invariably) lies with official and expert sources, which tend to peddle a rather simple storyline when it comes to presenting accounts prefabricated for media reporting. Typically, the UK Government’s *Creative industries economic estimates 2015* told us that one in 12 UK jobs was in the creative economy and that the creative industries accounted for 5.6% of total employment and also 5% of the UK economy’s turnover (DCMS 2015, 4). This became headline news – and more importantly, common sense.

If we restrict ourselves to considering only policy outputs that appear in the public domain, we end up failing to recognise that *sub rosa* there has already been considerable lobbying and manoeuvring within a policy community to favour given options. Seemingly authoritative pronouncements are commonly the outcome of a hidden process of selection

and elaboration inside government and related policy elites. Hidden, because it is largely conducted behind the scenes. But that does not mean it is secret. Such dealings can sometimes be reconstructed by way of research (Schlesinger 2009).

The creative turn

How did the so-called creative turn become so pervasive? And what *is* the “creative economy” supposed to be?

The tale could be told in several ways. One illustrative account goes as follows. It was the marketing of the term the “creative industries” in 1997–1998 by the first British New Labour government, led by Prime Minister Tony Blair, which firmly put this trope on the national agenda. Then, as the ideas caught on beyond the UK, they shifted by stages onto the global plane. Creative industries discourse was developed as a political-economic project in the Department for Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS) by the team around Chris Smith, New Labour Secretary of State for that ministry. Expertise provided by think tanks, policy advisers and industry figures contributed significantly to shaping the policy process (Hesmondhalgh et al. 2015).

The socio-linguist Norman Fairclough (2000, 22–23) has shown how “assumptions about the global economy” led to an emphasis on competition between Britain and other countries”, a “project of renewal designed to improve Britain’s competitive position”. In the UK, this framework has remained in place, irrespective of the government in power.

Thus, contrary to the view that the intellectuals are at best a marginal force in our society – that they have become mere “interpreters”, rather than “legislators” in the terms espoused by Bauman (1992) – there is plainly a public policy intelligentsia eager to shape the world of cultural policy through discourse and action. The production of discourse and related policy proposals has now continued for some two decades in the UK and not only there, because ideas have circulated globally through policy spaces and institutions, and moreover, become increasingly embedded in academic research and teaching internationally.

Reflecting in retrospect, former UK Culture Secretary Chris Smith (2013) – himself part of the policy intelligentsia – has remarked:

In 1998 – as secretary of state for culture, media and sport in the newly-elected Labour government – I published a book, *Creative Britain*. In it, I argued that the arts were for everyone, not just the privileged few; and that the creative industries – dependent for their success on individual artistic creativity – had moved from the fringes to the centre of the UK economy, with huge benefits for the social and economic health of the nation. I called for the nurturing and celebration of creative talent to be at the heart of the political agenda.

This quotation – reflecting afterthoughts some 15 years on – encapsulates the essentials of the creative economy belief system.

It was not Smith’s book, however, that became the original keystone of the discourse. Looking back, it is striking just how much an expediently written policy paper came to exert an exceptional influence in generating an initial framework for discussion. The UK DCMS’ definition of the creative industries in the very first *Creative Industries Mapping Document* has been cited copiously not only in the Anglosphere but everywhere:

Those activities which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property. (1998, 3)

The key move was to *aggregate* 13 distinct fields of cultural practice, to *designate* these as “industries”, and so to *constitute* a new policy object whose central purpose was – and remains – to “maximise economic impact... at home and abroad”. Moreover, by making the exploitation of intellectual property so crucial, the complexity of cultural value was subordinated to economic value.

Some have denounced this approach as the acme of neo-liberalism – understood in this instance as the celebration of individualistic entrepreneurship in a free market. As a corrective, in their definitive new book on New Labour cultural policy, Hesmondhalgh et al. (2015) have rightly pointed to wider objectives pursued by the British *creativistas* – the boost to arts spending, the attempts at social inclusion, the educational aspirations. The question, perhaps, is how much these other goals have truly acted as counterweights to the centrality of economics.

Naturally, the “creative turn” had antecedents. One influential interpretation of the history of pertinent ideas suggests that the conceptual journey started with the “*culture industry*” of mass communication critiqued by Horkheimer and Adorno (1997 [1944]). Subsequently, this approach was reformulated by figures such as Garnham (1990 [1984]) in Britain and Miège (2004 [1984]) in France, who developed a Marxist political economy of the “*cultural industries*” (to which media were central). The political economization of culture became the intellectual basis for cultural industries policies pursued by left-wing policy-makers as one response to urban decline and de-industrialization, and also in some instances (notably in France) as part of the struggle to secure necessary material conditions for combatting cultural imperialism (Mattelart, Delcourt, and Mattelart 1983). Later, New Labour recoded these concerns in their “*creative industries*” trope. Ever since, that particular formulation has been used incessantly and widely, irrespective of the political colour of its protagonists or indeed, the nature of their political regime.

Creative industries thinking became a kind of blueprint to be applied or modified. Read the official and academic literature and you will find that the number and type of “industries” may – and do – vary from one country to another. And then, at times, the “*cultural industries*” may be carefully distinguished from “*creative industries*”, with culture often depicted as more fundamental or at the core of a society’s symbolic production (The Work Foundation 2007). What, however, remains common and largely undisturbed is the overall strategy pursued by many states: namely, to construct the creative industries and latterly, the “*creative economy*”, as a policy object that can be managed to secure primarily economic and sometimes social outcomes so as to increase competitiveness.

The economization of national culture is a globally attractive proposition. Any nation can adopt it and policy transfer has proven relatively easy. The creative industries idea is protean and can be readily indigenized to fit local circumstances. It can become the official policy of the Chinese Communist Party or a development ideology espoused by the United Nations (Keane 2007; United Nations 2013). It can be used supra-nationally, at nation-state or sub-state levels, and in the region or city. Consequently, creative nations, regions and cities, are now so much part of the competitive landscape that everyone takes them for granted. First, the curatorial institutions invent new spaces, and then they seek to employ themselves to mow the lawns and trim the hedges that they have themselves designed.

Thus, for instance, what is called “*creative place-making*” (Markusen 2014) is an inherently restless, unfinished process, because new icons of brand differentiation have continually to be found and new policies to be devised the better to compete, for instance, in film, TV, games, mega-events or performances. Or new incentives have to be found to stimulate the earth-scouring quest for location and relocation. This means that the marketplace for

cultural gabfests for the like-minded and the demand for advice by creative consultants is never exhausted. Neither is the continuous flow of academic commentary nor the litany of instruction to up-and-coming generations on how best to prepare themselves for pursuing the chimera of creative entrepreneurship.

If the UK made the initial policy moves, it was in the USA that the best-known academic interventions were initially fashioned. The economist, Richard Caves (2000), was first to offer a serious book-length analysis of the creative industries. His work avoided the now commonplace fetishization of the term. He wrote of diverse “creative goods” that had something in common – contending rightly that the production of films, recorded music, the visual arts, and cultural events and performances are all highly risky in terms of any calculation of success or failure. Caves focused on the specifics of contracts and the industrial organization of relevant sectors. He did not create a unitary policy object. That was left to others.

Hot on his heels, another US economist, Richard Florida (2002), writing in a very different, more popular, style took centre stage, to conjure up and hail the rise of the “creative class”. In essence, he sold the attractive notion to policy-makers that almost one-third of Americans could be classified as “creative” and that by making sure that local conditions were right for those engaged in cultural work, a wide range of places could be transformed into creative cities or regions. In this funky re-versioning of Gouldner’s (1979) New Class theory, erstwhile symbol-manipulating intellectuals were restyled as productive creatives. Of course, even earlier, post-industrial theorists such as Daniel Bell had presaged such thinking (1973) but not with such resounding policy *éclat*.

Enter the creative economy

It was a short step from increasingly pervasive talk about creative industries to the follow-on coinage of the creative economy that now dominates the scene. We may interpret this locution as an invitation to think of designated industries as systemically interconnected, as constituting a whole. The British business consultant, John Howkins (2001), first effectively marketed this notion. Like the UK’s DCMS, he laid emphasis on the value of intellectual property and the consequent “global battle for comparative advantage”. From this perspective, creativity becomes interesting because it is identified with “human capital” – a terminology that by analogy first and foremost defines human beings as the objects of various kinds of investment – education to the fore – that might enhance the qualities of labour (Becker 2008).

For the most part, the “creative economy” has been a mobilizing slogan. It has been deployed alongside a range of cognate ideas – and associated practical interventions. The incessant conceptual parade includes “creative cities”, “creative innovation”, “creative skills”, “creative education” and “creative ecology”. Moreover, as during the past decade the digital revolution has reshaped policy thinking everywhere, the “creative turn” has spawned compound neologisms that try to capture current transformations in production, circulation and consumption: the “digital creative economy” is a case in point.

The EU provides an illuminating case study of diffusion. While not all member states have taken up the creative economy cause with equal enthusiasm, by degrees the European Commission (EC) has been won over to treating it as something to be taken into account. The creative and cultural industries (CCIs) are at the heart of the European Agenda for Culture, part of the framework of the EU’s Lisbon Strategy for Jobs and Growth, originally set out in March 2000.³ In May 2007, the European Council endorsed the role that the CCIs might play in supporting the Lisbon Strategy and in April 2008, the European Parliament

(EP) welcomed the Council and Commission's recognition of the importance of culture and creativity for the European project.

The EP singled out the contribution of *The Economy of Culture in Europe*, a report commissioned by the EC in 2006 from KEA, a Brussels-based consultancy. This was an undoubted scene-setter for the EU's "creative turn". It has been followed by a plethora of other reports. We might note another major contemporary reference point as, in fact, the creative turn has been global. The *Creative Economy Report 2013* (United Nations 2013) and, in 2008 and 2010, its predecessor versions, have set the frame for much subsequent global debate and policy work.

The EU uses the CCI formulation as a diplomatic balancing act between states that stress cultural industries and those that emphasize creative industries but overall it is presently inflected towards the economization of culture.

In the second of its major reports for the EC, *The Impact of Culture on Creativity*, KEA (2009, 3; emphasis added) further reworked the conceptual landscape and posed the problem in this way:

The objective of the study is to have a better understanding of *the influence of culture on creativity, a motor of economic and social innovation*.

As "productivity gains at manufacturing level are no longer sufficient to establish a competitive advantage", what is needed is "culture-based creativity – the kind of thinking beyond production that has made Apple such a global force in design, or Virgin's adding to the 'experience' of long-haul aviation". From a policy point of view, the argument was intended to insert creativity into innovation policy, among whose objectives was to "[b]rand Europe as the place to create" along with establishing new programmes, institutions and regulatory frameworks to support "creative and cultural collaboration". The key ambition, though – still a work in progress involving several different collaborators – was "to establish a Creativity Index (with a set of 32 indicators) whose aim is to assess the creative environment in EU Member States and to enable the development of a creative ecology in Europe through art and culture" (KEA 2009, 9). The creative economy policy agenda from the very beginning has been a pitch to governments everywhere to change the emphasis of policy-making.

A clear turning point was reached inside the EU by 2010, by which time the creative economy had become part of the EC's *doxa*. Its *Green Paper* (European Commission 2010) was an *omnium gatherum* of things that CCIs might do for economic development anywhere, and a rehearsal of what by now had become the conventional wisdom about their nature and role.⁴ The EC was seeking a strategy in the context of global competition, embodied in Europe2020 as well as steps taken to develop a European Agenda for Culture. The *Green Paper* pointed forward to what has since become a strategic concern with the "digital economy": the creation of "a true single market for online content and services"; an Innovation Union that would "strengthen the role of CCIs as a catalyst for innovation and structural change"; and the Strategy on Intellectual Property, especially "the use and management of rights" (European Commission 2010, 6, 8).

The uneven diffusion of creative industries discourse

While the creative policy turn has not by any means produced uniformity of thinking inside the EU, there is no doubt that it has impacted on the terms in which culture is thought about in policy-making circles. Two responses illustrate the point. Others could be cited.

In Italy, the European Year of Creativity and Innovation 2009 was launched with the local aim of “growing the awareness of creativity and innovation, key competences for personal, social and economic development” (Rolando 2009, 1). It involved collaboration between various government departments in the wake of publication of the *Libro bianco sulla creatività (White Paper on creativity)* in 2007. Chaired by an economist, the late Walter Santagata, the White Paper concentrated on industrial sectors rather than categories of creative work. Distinctions were drawn between material culture, content industries, and artistic and historical heritage. In Stefano Rolando’s words, the point was to bring together “*il valore del ‘bello e utile’*” (“the value of ‘the beautiful and the useful’”). The creative turn taken in London a decade earlier, and by then endorsed in Brussels, provoked an attempt to measure the total value of the creative sectors in Italy, in particular, the percentage of GDP and the workforce for which these accounted.

Santagata’s report aimed to delineate an Italian “model of creativity” to assist national development and establish a statistical basis for international comparison. The 14 designated fields of activity were analogous to, but significantly different from, the well-worn nostrums of the UK’s DCMS. They were creative cities, design and material culture, fashion, architecture, the knowledge economy, advertising, cinema, TV, radio, publishing, the food industry, contemporary art, music and cultural heritage (Santagata 2007, XI).

National differences persist about which creative industries include or exclude, in keeping with the diverse institutional development of each state. In Germany, the term *Kulturwirtschaft* was the starting point for discussing the “creative industries”. In 2007, on the basis of its report, *Kultur in Deutschland*, the Bundestag agreed upon an official federal definition, intended to bring statistical consistency to research and analysis.

The term [...] Creative Industries, is generally and broadly applied to [...] those cultural or creative enterprises [...] that predominantly operate commercially and are concerned with the creation, production, distribution and/or medial [*sic*] circulation of cultural/creative goods and services.

Included under the definition of “Cultural Industries” are the following core sectors: the music industry, the literary market, the art market, the film industry, radio, the performing arts, the design industry, architecture and the press. The term “Creative Industries” incorporates additional sub-segments that include the advertising industry, the software/gaming industry as well as a category denoted as “miscellaneous”. (As originally translated from German in Projektzukunft 2008, 5; cf. Reich 2013, 16)

This is another variation on the theme of classification, with creative industries on this occasion clearly subordinate to cultural industries. Both the German and Italian examples link the need for categorization to the desire for measurement, a matter of growing importance for the global governance of the creative economy, and a policy question in its own right for bodies such as the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO).

By 2012, the question of how to measure the CCIs was firmly on the EU agenda. In parallel with wider arguments rehearsed elsewhere (Cooke and De Propriis 2011; Cunningham 2014) innovation policy had also been adjusted to include “smart specialization strategies” sensitive to the creative economy and KEA (2012, 30) had been commissioned “to create a benchmarking raster ... or set of indicators, to measure policies focusing on local economic development through CCIs”. The new framework was intended to aid European regional and urban centres in accessing EU structural funds, with the central focus of the new toolkit on “policy instruments which impact on local economic and business development” (KEA 2012, 3). However unevenly, a dominant way of seeing was being established in the EU.

The approach outlined above extended to the EP. In a report for its Committee on Culture and Education on how culture could be used in the interests of cohesion, an appeal was made to European solidarity beyond the economy, with a clear recognition of the strains and stresses provoked by the present economic crisis. The report, speaking of a “paradigm shift” in recognition of the connections between “different dimensions of culture”, noted key moves in European policies but also bluntly underlined the inadequacy of that acknowledgement, given that culture was not merely “a sector but a resource” that – conceived more broadly – might enhance EU social and economic development in multifold ways and “keep the European utopia alive” (European Parliament 2012, 10, 15).

While, the term “culture” was deployed in line with the EP’s broad preference, the overwhelming focus was on its economic and social uses, underlining the present emphasis on an instrumental approach, inflected by the incorporation of creative economy thinking. It is not surprising then, that in Brussels as in London, the economic value of European culture is routinely summarized in a familiar kind of headline statement: that the creative sectors represent more than 3% of European GDP and employ some 3% of the EU’s workforce (EC 2016).

Alongside such regional shifts, as have taken place in Europe, the globalization of these ideas has been best illustrated by UNESCO’s series of three *Creative economy reports*, the first of which, published in 2008, called the creative economy a “new development paradigm” covering all forms of cultural work. Diverse political regimes and distinct levels of economic development have shaped the specific take-up of ideas originally minted in London. These have been indigenized in East Asia, China and Australasia (Flew 2012).

Some now argue that the 2013 version of the trio of United Nations reports has represented a challenge to the dominant discourse and, in effect, is subverting it from within. Great hopes are placed on rehabilitating of the idea of a “cultural economy” – with the emphasis on culture rather than economy, on the social rather than the individual (Isar 2015). Although such views do not occupy the mainstream, they are part of an international counter-discourse to that of the creative economy.

The practical embodiment of ideas

Cultural policy is by no means exclusively concerned with economic outcomes. But its dominant focus on accountability through quantitative measures has set the parameters for bodies intervening in the cultural sphere – whether these be arts councils, museums and galleries, public service broadcasters, operas and orchestras or theatres and libraries. This takes us into the realm of “cultural intermediaries”, a term influentially deployed by Bourdieu (1984). A little-studied area until recently, this is now of growing academic interest (Smith Maguire and Matthews 2014).

One telling instance of the impact of creative economy orthodoxy in the UK may be illustrated by the case of the BBC, still the UK’s premier mainstream cultural and journalistic body and a brand of huge importance in the serious global game of exercising “soft power”.

The future orientation of the BBC will be decided after the conclusion of a process known as the Charter Review. The new Charter will run until 2027. The Review is meant to be a period of reflection that occurs every decade to revisit the BBC’s purposes, scope and scale, and to result in a new deal for the British public (and by extension for the global audiences that increasingly access the BBC’s output).

Under political pressure, the BBC has sought to redefine its legitimacy. Positioning itself for the Charter Review its submission to the UK Government’s consultation was

tellingly titled *British Bold Creative*. It was not just the title, though, that proclaimed membership of the creative club. The corporation professed its ambition to become “Britain’s creative partner and a platform for this country’s incredible talent and the work done by its great public institutions” (BBC 2015, 6). The UK government responded in kind. It enjoined the BBC to make “supporting the creative industries [...] the heart of its operations, taking care to minimize any undue market impacts” (DCMS 2016b, 10).

The case of the BBC reflects the increased normalization of creative industries thinking. The discursive *mélange* of constant gardener and patriotic marketer captures perfectly the reflex, modal way of talking about the role of culture in the public sphere, across arts bodies, support agencies, government and indeed higher education. Ever-ready creative partners proclaim their virtue and relevance by being useful to the national or global economy.

The *extent* of this thinking can readily be judged from the publications routinely produced by the major British arts and cultural organizations. Its *depth* of penetration may be illustrated by some of my most recent research into British cultural agencies where, together with colleagues, I have illustrated the ideological force of policy intervention by government in shaping the work of bodies officially designated part of the creative economy.⁵

In what follows, I wish to use the term “cultural intermediaries” in a particular sense: to describe public bodies whose mission is to make the creative economy work more effectively in line with the overarching national goals pursued by states. In that regard, although the examples presented here concern British agencies, the organizational rationales pursued are typical of many bodies worldwide that have been set up to intervene purposefully in culture.

First, we should note the importance of the distinct institutional landscapes within which such support agencies work. They are shaped by a distinct history of policy ideas as well as fashionable thought about what at any moment constitutes relevant know-how for intervening in, and building, a competitive creative economy. Each agency connects with its political masters and funders, its clientele, and a range of businesses of diverse scales. Most typically, the latter are small- to medium-sized enterprises or microbusinesses.

One of our studies, which took the form of both contemporary history and cultural sociology, concerned the creation, life and death of the UK Film Council (UKFC) (Doyle et al. 2015). The UKFC was the strategic body set up in 2000 to bring an elusive “sustainability” to the film industry and culture in Britain. Based in London, its institutional life lasted for just over a decade. Film policy, constantly oscillating between cultural and economic goals, was the Ur-model for the wider creative industries policies now in place in the UK. Yet, even in the digital age film policy has retained a certain distinctiveness – which underlines the continuing importance of the distinct sectors that persist within the creative industries framework.

After a decade’s intervention, on the agency’s demise nothing really fundamental had changed: crucially, the British film industry was still fragmented – “unsustainable”. There were some positive outcomes: the key form of support for the British film industry, inward investment in UK film production by the USA, grew; British box office receipts increased somewhat; the digitization of exhibition was accelerated; regional film funding rose. Ironically, the Oscar-winning movie, *The King’s Speech*, was an outstanding post-mortem success for a defunct agency, which had part-funded this production.

The political architects of creative industries policy – the first New Labour government – had created the Film Council for *industrial* reasons. The British Film Institute (BFI), until

then the premier film body, tasked with a primarily *cultural* role, became a subordinate institution. This was a strong signal of the pre-eminence of industrial purposes over cultural policy. A decade later, the UKFC was summarily closed down on supposed efficiency grounds by Conservative ministers at the start of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government of 2010–2015. More money was spent than saved by shifting its functions – ironically – into the BFI. Now this body itself has been repurposed – defined as a creative industries body that straddles, and must negotiate, industrial and cultural priorities that often diverge (BFI 2012). Viewed historically, film policy in the UK has produced a scrapheap of defunct agencies – each originally set up to make things more efficient. What has not changed, though, is the state’s interest in managing a prime cultural industry.

Our second case concerns an ethnographic, sociological study of a Scottish business support agency, Cultural Enterprise Office (CEO), set up in Glasgow by a coalition of public sector bodies in 2001 (Schlesinger, Selfe, and Munro 2015a). A true embodiment of the creative turn, the formation of CEO was typical of moves taking place all over the UK at the time.

We found that, over its lifespan, whichever political party was in power, intervention in the Scottish creative economy was modelled on the received wisdom produced by policy-makers, think tanks and academics working in London – *the* pre-eminent centre of such thinking in Europe. In this inherited policy framework, CEO assisted microbusinesses in Scotland to become more “businesslike”, providing “soft” business support – advice and training. This type of intervention is one of the instruments that policy-makers use when trying to increase the scale and robustness of creative enterprises, although it can be really difficult for support bodies of this kind to demonstrate the impact of their intervention to funders.

The two studies discussed above focused on the mediation of policy – the day-to-day implementation of policy-influenced practice in the cultural field that occurs in response to the formulation of grand ideas, such as that of building a globally competitive creative economy. Completed only recently, they have demonstrated the tenacity of dominant ideas and the extent to which intervention by cultural intermediaries is deeply influenced by policy frameworks and the supporting discourses that both justify and amplify them. Of course, on the ground, public policy initiatives may be cherry-picked by those in creative work, and what are seen as irrelevant ideas simply ignored. Such stratagems, however, do not change the overall picture. Variants of creative economy thinking have set the terms of reference for any sort of entry to the conversation.

Shaping the academic agenda

Cultural intermediation of an analogous kind also occurs in higher education. At least 30 universities around the UK – my own included – presently offer undergraduate and masters courses in the creative and/or cultural industries, or the creative economy, with or without some explicit admixture of the digital dimension – and this kind of provision is emulated elsewhere. What holds for teaching also applies to research. Like their counterparts in other countries, the UK Research Councils have invested heavily in research into the creative and digital economies. This agenda has developed hand in glove with that of government policy, to which the Research Councils are extremely responsive. Although their priorities do not determine the precise scope of what research can be done, like all agenda setting, the themes laid down by such influential funding bodies and the terms in which they are presented do tell us what to think about, even if disaffectedly.

In parallel with public cultural bodies, the institutionalization of the creative economy agenda in British universities has developed apace. The bevy of degree courses already mentioned supplies talent for a saturated and largely under-paying marketplace, where personal connections count hugely, unpaid internships are common, and in which precarious “portfolio” work is the norm – although these tough conditions do not diminish its attractiveness, as McRobbie (2016) has shown in her illuminating studies. Aware of the fragility of such forms of cultural work, she contends that a reflexive pedagogy “permits ... ‘shards of light’ to emerge as prefigurative forms of social understanding and political consciousness” (McRobbie 2016, 9–10). On her evidence, though, this progressive take appears to be more a consolatory belief than an unambiguously demonstrable conclusion. In many respects, the exigent conditions of work in the creative sectors sum up the state of play for generations entering the wider job market right now as members of the “precarariat” (Standing 2011).

Along with the growth of university courses, in the past few years the UK Research Councils have been committed to research on the creative economy and the overlapping “digital economy” and to effecting brokerage between the higher education and creative sectors. Similar kinds of investment have been made in other countries.

A key illustrative initiative in the UK was the establishment of five major university consortia, four of which were designated “knowledge exchange hubs for the creative economy”.⁶ The fifth grouping was set up as a research centre, with a remit to research copyright and new business models in the creative economy.⁷ At the end of 2016, all of these centres came to the end of their funded four-year lifespan, although it seems highly likely that the research focus on the creative economy will continue.⁸

Such initiatives mobilize significant numbers of academic researchers and organize their connections with a range of enterprises, artists and performers, public bodies and governments, and therefore understandably become a focus of public accountability for money spent (AHRC 2015). Engagement of this kind can undoubtedly be valuable because academics are also citizens and may benefit society by their knowledgeable involvement outside the academy. Arguably, we *should* use our expertise to play into policy debate and advice. That said, *how* we do this, and on what terms, is surely a major matter for discussion. My own participation in the work of several bodies concerned with the creative economy has certainly given me insights into the pressures these encounter, not least from government and major business interests determined to pursue their own goals. It has also added considerably to my professional academic knowledge of how things really work.

In essence, then, the terms of trade for academic researchers of the creative economy are ambiguous, not least in the much-vaunted pursuit of “knowledge exchange” with the worlds of practice, which is extremely complicated (Schlesinger, Selfe, and Munro 2015b). Although the programmatic approach currently taken by the UK Research Councils does not necessarily exclude any particular project nor preclude the possibility of critique, the framework has been shaped by the continuous demand to demonstrate the relevance of the research or engagement in question to the overarching aim of building up specific sectors of the national economy so that these will operate more effectively under conditions of global competitiveness.

Countervailing trends?

Of course, the creative turn has not been an exclusive goal but rather a dominant one. In this section, I shall retain the focus on currents at play in the British case which, given its wider influence, may portend wider shifts. Let us consider two recent interventions that

have begun to sound a different note, repositioning the creative economy in relation to wider conceptions of first, cultural policy, and second, cultural value.

In the first instance, the UK Government published *The Culture White Paper* in March 2016. This was proudly proclaimed to be the first such document since 1965, and underlined the broad value of culture to British society, noting the importance of three types of cultural value:

- the **intrinsic** value: the enriching value of culture in and of itself;
- the **social** value: improving educational attainment and helping people to be healthier; and
- the **economic** value: the contribution culture makes to economic growth and job-creation. (DCMS 2016a, 15)

It has been rare for “intrinsic value” to be taken seriously by governments in recent years. “Social value”, which fits a broadly utilitarian calculus, has certainly figured in the thinking of all governments, but has not been accorded the weight of “economic value”, as will be clear from the argument so far.

Perhaps the new, expressly cultural turn is not too surprising, as the UK has been convulsed of late by a number of crises that take a cultural form. These include anxieties in major sections of the public about the extent of migration from the EU and immigration more generally; the UK’s ambivalent relationship to the EU, evidenced by the “Brexit” Referendum of 23 June 2016; the existence of home-grown jihadism and both official and public concern about the social integration of some elements of the British Muslim community; and the continuing challenge to Great Britishness of the quest for Scottish independence. Appeals to the creative economy really cannot offer a new roadmap for how to address such shortcomings in the workings of UK culture. It is no accident, surely, that the official cultural policy agenda has broadened precisely to take in concern about social inclusion, building employment opportunities for ethnic minorities and economically disadvantaged young people, and how to address and capitalize on the UK’s growing diversity. As the present cultural crisis is also a crisis of the British state, is it surprising that how the UK projects itself internationally – the question of its “soft power” and “brand” – and how it attracts visitors and tourists, also figure large?

All of this, however, plays in the White Paper against the Conservative government’s enthusiastic advocacy of reductions in public support for the cultural sectors and its encouragement to those working in these fields to make good the shortfall by raising more private funds. In the end, one must conclude, it is not so easy to abolish the continuing salience of the creative economy under the nominal cover of cultural policy. When providing figures about the economic value of culture, recourse was made in the White Paper to the government’s creative economy statistics (DCMS 2016a, 16). Moreover, when discussing the uses of a “measurement framework” that “seeks to consolidate evidence on the value of culture”, the White Paper not surprisingly noted that assessing the impact of cultural policy was “strongest for economic development. For personal wellbeing, educational attainment, life chances and soft power, more work is needed to refine how we measure the specific impact that culture makes” (DCMS 2016a, 58). It remains to be seen, therefore, whether this is a first step on a new road or – more likely – simply the setting up of a diversion on an old one.

The second example concerns a report published by the AHRC in April 2016. This summed up the results of the Research Council’s “cultural value project”, an initiative taking up “the imperative to reposition first-hand, individual experience of arts and

culture at the heart of enquiry into cultural value” (Crossick and Kaszynska 2016). This intervention intended, *inter alia*, to question the primacy of economic value and was also an attempt to reframe the purposes and character of evaluation in the prevalent discourse and policy framework.⁹ Although this initiative sought to extend the Research Council’s agenda in the field of cultural research, it was recognized that the very concept of cultural value “may be seen as a construct of policy” and that, consequently, research has “tended to be driven by the case for public funding, and this has led to a focus on the publicly-funded arts” (Crossick and Kaszynska 2016, 24). In short, the project itself was unavoidably framed by the creative economy agenda to which it has been a riposte and therefore constrained to broaden debate without, however, surmounting the original epistemological obstacle.

This effort to enlarge the scope of what is relevant to academic research has made use of the concept of an “ecology of culture”, stressing the interconnections of distinct publicly funded, commercial, third-sector, amateur and participatory practices. While it is important to note this existing complexity, the concept of a cultural ecology is itself freighted with unexplored meaning. Unnoticed by the authors, in the context of the UK, where the multi-national character of the state is under deep strain, the use of ecological metaphors may be interpreted not only as a way of virtuously conjoining diverse cultural funding regimes and practices but also – much more significantly – as one of carelessly erecting enclosures around the component national cultures of the state. In the context of arguments for Scottish independence, consider the potential political uses to be made of an English or a Scottish cultural ecology.¹⁰ Cultural ecologies can easily be reformulated as “national ecologies”, with profound consequences for identities.¹¹

Conclusion

Since the creative economy became a policy object, this has gradually given rise to a supporting “creative economy industry”, which is not only national but also international. Academic research and publishing have become an important part of this, alongside the incessant flow of reports from policy advisers, creative consultants and conferences organized by profit-driven ideas brokers and interest groups.

The espousal of creative economy thinking means that culture is seen primarily as embodying tradable economic value. A self-sustaining, self-referential framework of ideas has developed that has become largely impervious to critique. The omnipresence of creative economy thinking raises questions about how the research agenda is being formulated and the consequent positioning of academics in debate.

To note the prevalence of the economic dimension does not at all mean that other valuations of culture have been eclipsed. There are counter-discourses and, as has been shown, the expediency of policy means that compromises can be effected and different registers adopted, according to circumstances. Mostly beyond the imaginings of the policy world, people continue to engage in cultural practices for their inherent satisfaction, the pursuit of aesthetic goals, their own and others’ fulfilment and self-development. Craft sensibilities – such as those that shape the patient achievement of high-level skills or the fastidious making of objects, described so well by Sennett (2008) – have not disappeared.¹²

If we stopped talking about the creative economy would anything be lost? Hardly. We still have ways of discussing human inventiveness and originality. Nothing stops us speaking comprehensibly about the diversity of cultural practices that continue to exist but which have long been overshadowed by a compelling label of convenience that has put the

economy in the driving seat and shaped the public discourse so insistently. Surely, that is enough of an invitation to think afresh.

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Notes

1. This point is considered later when discussing the role of “cultural intermediaries”.
2. I was a member of the boards of Scottish Screen (the erstwhile national audiovisual agency) from 1997 to 2004, and of TRCMedia (a not-for-profit media training body) from 1998 to 2008. I have also been a member of the Advisory Committee for Scotland of Ofcom (the UK communications regulator) from 2004 to date, and since 2014 of that body’s Content Board. In respect of the latter, this article has been written in a purely professional academic capacity and any views expressed here are entirely my own.
3. In the six lines above, I have drawn directly on Schlesinger, Selfe, and Munro (2015a, 15).
4. The *Green Paper* (EC 2010, 5) aimed “at capturing the various connotations ascribed to the terms ‘cultural’ and ‘creative’ throughout the EU, reflecting Europe’s cultural diversity”. It defined “cultural industries” as

producing and distributing goods or services which at the time they are developed are considered to have a specific attribute, use or purpose which embodies or conveys cultural expressions, irrespective of the commercial value they may have. Besides the traditional arts sectors (performing arts, visual arts, cultural heritage – including the public sector), they include film, DVD and video, television and radio, video games, new media, music, books and press.

For their part, “creative industries”

use culture as an input and have a cultural dimension, although their outputs are mainly functional. They include architecture and design, which integrate creative elements into wider processes, as well as subsectors such as graphic design, fashion design or advertising.

5. Although that work draws out some features of current practice in the UK it has much wider, comparative implications.
6. Funded until April 2016, these were: The Creative Exchange; Design in Action; Creative Works London; and REACT.
7. CREATE. I must declare an interest. I have been Deputy Director of this centre from its inception; its funding ends in December 2016.
8. In June 2016, the AHRC issued a call for candidates competing to become Creative Economy Champion to consolidate existing work and shape future strategy and partnerships in the field.

9. The category of “experience” is treated as conceptually unproblematic in this project, being characterized as “fundamental and irreducible” (Crossick and Kaszynska 2016, 21) – itself a highly questionable assumption.
10. In an as yet unpublished paper on “Cultural Policy and Ecology”, I have argued that the underlying holism underplays culture’s agonistic qualities and that the concept of the cultural ecosystem biologises culture, thereby turning the analyst into a “doctor” concerned with its health and ailments. For instances of such curative thinking, see Holden (2015) and The Warwick Commission (2015).
11. An analogous point about constructing English history in ways that ignore the UK’s other nations has been made by Thomas (2016, 73).
12. McRobbie (2016, 13–14 and Ch. 6) has reservations about Sennett’s idealization of craft, not least because of his treatment of gender. But his work, nonetheless, offers an important normative counter-narrative to that of the *creativistas*.

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