Inside the Whale (and how to get out of there): moving on from two decades of creative industries research

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Abstract

In keeping with the spirit of this special issue, this article takes a retrospective view - analysing two decades of research on local, city-based cultural economies in the dominant context of the ‘creative industries’ policy paradigm. We begin by exploring our own position in the field – as early arbiters for the cultural industries – and the political and economic context which informed our own (shared) efforts to further progressive claims for culture, amidst the transforming post-industrial city of the 1990s. The subsequent rise of a creative industries discourse – in the UK and beyond – had a transformative effect on those progressive claims, not least in bringing to the fore a more economistic, capital-driven model of urban renewal which served to undermine many of the promises that had been invested in popular urban culture under social democracy. How this shift was played out in the academic literature – and its political consequences - is the theme of the remainder of the article.

Keywords cultural industries, clusters, creative cities, Manchester, politics

Introduction

In the late 1990s we worked together on a research project entitled ‘Cultural Industries and the City’\(^2\). The aim of this project was to investigate the relationships between what were then emerging as the cultural or newly-minted ‘creative’ industries and transforming inner-city areas in the UK. Particularly, we were concerned with how these relationships were unfolding in the rapidly-changing and regenerating city of Manchester, a place then emerging from the worst effects of deindustrialization, and starting to tentatively embrace the ‘new’ economy of services

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and ‘knowledge-led’ production. It is worth recalling that at this time there was a tremendous amount of excitement about the creative industries, following the coming to power of New Labour in 1997, and the recent formation of a responsible ministry - the Department of Culture, Media and Sport - with a specific remit to promote this nascent ‘sector’. Influential in this period was the work of writers such as Charles Landry (2000) and Peter Hall (2000) and in national government, Chris Smith (1998), who were all keen to promote the social and economic virtues of the creative industries, the idea of the ‘creative city’, and, in New Labour’s case ‘Creative Britain’, reflecting something of a wider (international) turn towards ‘culture’ and ‘creativity’ as vehicles for post-industrial economic restructuring and growth (e.g. see Bianchini and Parkinson, 1993; Montgomery, 1995; Radbourne, 1997). Local authorities and economic development agencies were also enthusiastic to learn about the benefits that ‘creative’ industries might provide. It was into this context that our project emerged. After a decade in which the cultural industries had remained a local concern of municipal and metropolitan Labour-led councils, ours was a renewed effort, aimed at assessing the impacts of local cultural industries and their emerging contribution to the UK’s rapidly expanding economy of cultural commodities, places and symbols.

What first struck us then was a resurgent sense of confidence in Manchester, as well as in other UK regional cities. This seemed to reflect the mood of optimism following New Labour’s election, a renewed sense of hope following the damaging recession of the early 1990s, and some palpable relief after a long period of local authority decline under national Conservative rule. Culture (and the cultural economy) was at the heart of this confidence – and a new and active group of cultural apparachniks, intermediaries and entrepreneurs were central to its expression and articulation. The story about the city was changing. In Manchester, as in other UK cities, the idea that activities such as music, arts and media were economically regenerative and productive (rather than simply a drain on the public purse), and that cultural production could provide ‘real’ jobs and careers (and not just hobbies or distractions) seemed a new and irreverent claim. What’s more, these economic possibilities appeared to be running in parallel with a belief that the city was becoming culturally more ‘cosmopolitan’ – in terms of being more inclusive, internationalist and tolerant of different minorities (see Binnie and Skeggs, 2004; Taylor et al, 1996) In some
sense we shared in this nascent optimism – the research institute in which we worked had developed its reputation not simply by documenting but by participating actively in some of the popular cultural projects and initiatives then being identified as central to Manchester's cultural and economic renewal. As much as we were researching and evaluating change, we were also involved in manifesting it, at least to some minor degree (see Wynne and O’Connor, 1996; O’Connor and Gu, 2010).

The good mood was propelled not least by Manchester City Council and other local authorities, hitherto understood as clay-footed paternalists, now dynamically recast as a new and nimble breed of ‘civic entrepreneurs’ (see Tickell and Peck, 1996). These were supported not just by an army of developers, business executives and economic development agencies but also local arts institutions and a mixed collection of media, music and fashion-industry entrepreneurs; members of what one of us came later to refer to as the ‘post-Rave growth coalition’ (O’Connor in Hatherley, 2011, p. 120-1). Here was some kind of collective effort to project Manchester as a liberal and happening city with a more ‘sophisticated’ cultural outlook – a place that could feel at ease as a European city of distinction, if not quite the world-power it was in the days of cotton and cloth. At this time, a host of new governmental agencies were emerging to help script this cross-cultural, cross-class (but not yet multicultural or de-masculinised) vision of a new tomorrow:

Manchester is more than a geographical location or a political entity; it is a state of mind. It is Manchester United, the birthplace of computers, railways and Rolls-Royce; it is excellence in education. It is Oasis and the friendliest international airport in the world (Marketing Manchester, 1997, cited in Ward, 2000, p. 1096).

The process reached its zenith in 2004 when Peter Saville, Factory Records’ legendary graphic designer, was appointed Manchester’s first ‘creative director’ (O’Connor, 2007). This emergent desire to ‘market’ Manchester was emblematic of a

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3 Manchester expanded enormously from the late 18th century, at the forefront of the industrial revolution, building its wealth and fame (mainly) on organised textile production. Such was the speed and scale of industrial development in Manchester, and so rapid was the growth of populations to support it, it provided the blueprint for what the modern industrial city would look like for the next 150 years. Manchester was the ‘shock city of the age’ - as Asa Briggs (1963) famously termed it – and its radical embrace of unbridled commerce provided much of the empirical case for Marx and Engels in developing their revolutionary critique of capitalism.
municipal post-socialist, New Labour (and what became) ‘Blairite’ approach to urban politics; where a socially liberal, culturally-literate countenance masked what was always understood then (and much more in retrospect) as a new determination to make culture profit, or at the very least pay its way. If one vague aim was to inject a bit of commercial savvy into the ‘disinterested’ (and seemingly ‘elitist’ and ‘entitled’) domains of arts and culture, then a more focussed structural ambition was to take advantage of the re-energised (and increasingly mobile and deregulated) flows of financial capital, and to persuade retail, residential and leisure investors to speculate on some ‘culture-led regeneration’ in run-down urban cores. Similarly, the boost of resources provided by Europe (in the form of EU Structural Funds), as well as increased injections of national investment into arts and culture (via the National Lottery, Art Councils and their ilk) helped give cover and support for a blueprint re-imagining of what a ‘creative’ UK city might look and feel like (Wynne and O’Connor, 1998; Ward, 2000; Hesmondhalgh, et al, 2015; Oakley and O’Connor, 2015b). Yet underpinning this pragmatism was also a more popular and public narrative that imagined all boats would rise as Manchester (re)projected itself as a place that thrived on cultural innovation, newness and its own bullish ‘attitude’ (e.g. ‘Madchester’), obscuring the fact that while many Manchester people may well have shared a certain ‘state of mind’ they were also conjoined by high levels of relative deprivation, as well as being quite divided within the city, in both social and economic terms.

Given the prevailing script about Manchester and its ‘urban renaissance’ (see Hatherley, 2011; Peck and Ward, 2002), it was perhaps not surprising our interviews with cultural workers of the late-1990s tended to reveal a sense of optimism and ambition, both for the city and for themselves within it:

[Manchester’s] changed beyond recognition really. It feels a much more monied city centre than when I moved here (...) it’s the second city really, [and] now that’s been achieved (...) the next step is developing it as a European, international city (Arts Journalist).

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The future of the company is to be a household name in the UK and I really believe it will achieve that in the next twenty-four months. Our mission statement is delivering fast, cost effective and trusted information technology and support, banishing computer hassle for ever (IT Entrepreneur).

This is where my talent lies I suppose, anticipating future need (Graphics & Web Designer).

These striving futurists we not only regarded as involved in a somewhat vanguard rethinking of organised cultural production, but as consciously engaged in redefining their own relation to the city and its social and economic organisation (Banks et al, 2000; see also Wynne and O’Connor, 1996; O’Connor, 2015). Such people were challenging notions of what could be commodified (subcultures, knowledges, districts, symbols, moods, styles, atmospheres), by whom, and to what end, and establishing patterns of work that disregarded the time-space conventions of formal business in favour of a free-rolling and immersive labour that recognised no boundaries between work and life. Yet as much as they were interested in making a living (and having a good time doing it), they were also actively and self-consciously invested in contributing to ‘the city’, by evolving ways of working that demonstrated clear social and political concerns, beyond commercial profit-making (Banks, 2006; see also O’Connor and Wynne, 1998). Given the evidence, we felt somewhat confident (if never complacent) that these emerging industries could provide contexts for new kinds of civic collaboration to emerge, and for more ‘progressive’ (i.e. more inclusive, non-hierarchical, ethical, just) organisations and forms of work to establish, in productive worlds that appeared to value cultural pluralism and be less constrained by capitalist tradition and orthodoxy. Much seemed possible. To couch our analyses in terms of the social theory of the time, these actors appeared to represent something like the new ‘tribes’ of ‘postmodern’, ‘self-reflexive’ and ‘de-traditionalized’ economic subjects that critics saw as projecting forward their own shared and stylised social futures (Beck et al, 1994; Featherstone, 1991; Maffesoli, 1996). While our participants may have been living what theorists de jour such as Ulrich Beck (1992) and Anthony Giddens (1991) were understanding as somewhat more ‘individualized’ lives, amidst ‘risky’ social relations, constantly under threat from
the disruptive energies of ‘time-space compression’, as David Harvey (1989) termed it, they were also participants in what Beck and writers such as Scott Lash and John Urry (1994) understood as a more ambivalent set of social transformations – since one of the more positive dimensions of ‘late-’ or ‘post-’ modernity was that it was encouraging people to move beyond restrictive economic traditions and to shake off inherited social roles and identities.

While Manchester was our case, therefore, it was also symptomatic of broader national and international trends for culture-led renewal, faith in ‘creativity’ as a source of post-industrial innovation, and a belief that progressive and pragmatic alliances could be forged to ‘make things happen’. The creative industries ‘moment’ therefore seemed to offer something of an open horizon – and promised to take the post-industrial city in some positive new direction. It may not have been clear exactly where we were going, but that’s the nature of a zeitgeist, or at least, one whose infective optimism resisted being looked at too closely.

**Inside the Whale? Researching Local Cultural SMEs**

How are we to think of that period, looking back, and the kind of research to which it gave rise? Famously, in *Inside the Whale*, George Orwell (1940) took to task a group of authors who had not simply misread the 1930s political zeitgeist – we are well aware of how easy hindsight can be – but had wilfully ignored its warning signs and sought to go along with the historical flow from the womb-like comfort of the whale’s belly. Coming to terms with both the inevitable mistakes of the historical moment and the more wilful blindness or forgetting of the times is something we think is an urgent necessity, and involves more *mea culpa* than ‘we told you so’!

There is no space here to explore the full range of creative industries literature that emerged from this moment – some of which went on to influence work in this journal (e.g. see Ashton, 2013; Bottà, 2009; Kompatsiaris, 2014; Marshall, 2013; Perry et al, 2015, Strachan, 2007) - so instead we focus only on research that took as its object the locally-situated (and largely SME-driven) urban cultural economy. This is not only because that is where our own particular trajectory began, but also because in many respects this is from where the cultural and creative industries research and policy
agenda drew most of its initial energies. Certainly, from the late 1970s, in the UK (and Western Europe beyond), the rise of localized urban economies of independent artists, creatives and micro-businesses, operating on the margins of the subsidised arts, the large-scale cultural industries and, indeed, the socio-economic structures of the (post)industrial city, was a key source of the emancipatory and evolutionary claims for the cultural sector. Many of these claims drew on new forms of urban cultural practice and aspiration rooted in the enabling and liberating effects of post-war social democracies (e.g. see Ahearne, 2002; Banks, 2017; Beck and Cornford, 2012; Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; Hewison, 1995; Hollands and Vail, 2012; Frith and Horne, 1987, Mandel, 2016; McGuigan, 2004). Yet such radical elements were coming into contact with the economic mainstream through new ideologies of ‘enterprise’ and commercial self-creation amidst expanded fields of cultural, service and knowledge-driven production. That such elements were able to crystallise into a mixed economy of small firms, organisations and experimental collectives, working in metropolitan communities and ‘fringe’ urban districts, gave political inspiration to writers such as Nicholas Garnham (1990), who identified opportunities for growing new combinations of economic and (popular) cultural production both within and outside the market, as well as to John Myerscough (1988) who saw in cultural industries the more instrumental possibility of measuring the economic benefits and values of arts and culture, at both local and national scale. What ‘our’ creative industries moment then represented was a process of active combination within a politically-diverse cultural and economic habitus, one focussed primarily on harnessing the emergent powers of place, network and small enterprise. Here, cultural studies was helping to shape a new direction, moving into debates about the role of cultural production in the emergent post-industrial economy – a landscape of political uncertainty, for sure, but also one of great promise and possibility. How, then, was this possibility understood, especially in the kinds of social science and humanities scholarship that came so quickly to prevail in our particular corner of the field? Two strands in particular stand out.

Creative Clusters

The new narrative on urban cultural economy was perhaps best exemplified by the idea of the ‘creative cluster’, a term given immediate provenance in Michael Porter’s 1998 paper, which was a pithy condensation of a great deal of work in economic
geography seeking to identify the role of place in industrial location (‘why here and not there’?) and the ways in which cities or city-regions had managed to constantly adapt over time (or indeed, had failed to do so). Drawing on Alfred Marshall’s late 19th century notion of ‘atmosphere’ to describe the learning effects embedded in industrial districts (Marshall and Marshall, 1920), Porter moved beyond the neoclassical focus on the individual firm towards that of the numerous traded and untraded interdependencies between firms and their embedding in local contexts (Porter 1998; 2000). However, the cluster was more than a recognition of geographical focus, but suggested that the nature of industrial production was itself changing in a ‘post-Fordist’ age. The picture was no longer one of a small number of large companies organizing a supply chain. It was now more about a complex network of smaller players mutually benefiting from local skills and learning effects, along with a range of ‘shared externalities’, which – like Marshall’s ‘atmosphere’ – could sound very much like a local ‘culture’. The idea also picked up the more moral-economic inflections of the European context (especially the ‘Third Italy’), which following Piore and Sabel (1984), suggested that the role of ‘industrial districts’ was highly dependent on local social, political and cultural dimensions. This came loaded with the normative charge (or perhaps aspiration) that here was a market economy that could support local culture, and social democratic political values, all within an equitable framework that gave equal value to both competition and co-operation. Likewise, for the influential Allen Scott, the cultural economy mattered not only because it brought economic benefits that were expressible in GDP terms but also because of the kind of embedded sociability it generated (Scott, 2000; Gong and Hassink, 2017; Pratt, 2000; cf. Oakley and O’Connor, 2015a: 20-24). In Scott’s formulation, firms were rooted in place, and thus (implicitly) more ethical and resilient, and contributed ‘positive externalities’ to the city, making it more liveable, which in turn increased the stock of shared cultural knowledge and personnel available for the cultural economy.

This was an approach which we (and many other) cultural industry scholars found conducive, and one that quickly proved influential in the UK, as well as in Western Europe (see for example Banks et al, 2000; Bathelt, 2004; Bottà 2009, Drake, 2003; Hitters and Richards, 2003; Mommaas, 2004; Pratt, 2004). The normative claim that culture and economy were able to ally in productive harmony would also prove
influential, however, beyond the circumscribed limits of the cluster or agglomerated district.

**Creative Cities**

The notion of a progressive urban cultural economy also gained traction from the more general re-evaluation of the function of the city in the 1980s and 1990s. From the symbolic low point of 1975, when New York was declared bankrupt, the idea of the city as the vital crucible of modernity (Berman, 1984) or postmodernity (Raban, 1973; Harvey 1989) rapidly (re)gained ground. While Manuel Castells (1996) was ambitiously re-imagining the city as central to the new information economy and emergent ‘network society’, Peter Hall’s 1998 *magnum opus* was simultaneously portraying the city as driver of historical development *per se*, quite literally positioning the civil as the foundation of civilization. Hall’s urban historical creativity was multifaceted, with the economic, the scientific and the artistic/cultural as different dimensions of the deep innovative capacity of the city. How best urban planning and thinking could be reframed to explicitly build on this capacity formed a major part of his book and was directly linked to the work of Charles Landry (see Landry, 2000; Landry and Bianchini, 1995) who first coined the term ‘The Creative City’.

Both Hall and Landry drew heavily on a very Western and 19th century notion of the city as a semi-autonomous entity at the cutting edge of the new, working against the inertia of the rural and the heavy hand of the larger state. This was transmuted into the new discourse of innovation-driven growth that had become highly influential in the 1990s; it was from the cities that innovation would be driven and, like the medieval *stadt luft macht frei*, the place where the most creative members of society would be drawn. Within this, Landry gave culture a special primacy and creativity an instrumental purpose:

> Cultural resources are the raw materials of the city and its value base; its assets replacing coal, steel or gold. Creativity is the method of exploiting these resources and helping them grow (Landry, 2000, p. 7).

A city’s vibrant culture was an index of its wider creative potential, one that could be used to signal to footloose capital and draw global talent to the cultural ‘brand’ of a city. In the form of the creative industries, culture was also to provide new sources of
employment and competitiveness, as it moved closer to economic centre-stage. Cities could only deliver these economic gains, Landry argued, if they adopted the more ‘holistic’ non-linear, non-instrumental approach associated with art. Earlier, in *Soft City* (1973) Jonathan Raban had suggested living in the city was an art rather than a science; Landry’s manifesto tried to operationalize this. The creative city thesis connected urban embeddedness, networked interdependency, the knowledge economy and so on with the idea the ‘elective affinity’ between art, artists and the city; a trope that could be traced back through the metropolitan avant-gardes and modernisms of the pre-and inter-war periods, with their privileged ‘villages’ and ‘quarters’, through to *La Vie Bohème* of Baudelaire and others stretching back to the early 19th century.

While in many ways Landry was responding opportunistically to a process already in train, it’s hard to overestimate how far the idea of the ‘creative city’ came to influence thought about the creative industries more generally, and how it continues directly and indirectly to shape academic and policy thinking internationally (e.g. see Bodirsky, 2011; Cooke and Lazzeretti, 2008, Evans and Shaw, 2004; Gong and Hassink, 2017; Lazzaretti et al, 2016; Mateos-Garcia and Bakhshi, 2016; Pratt, 2008; Zarlenga et al 2016). Further, if the amount of public policy commissions, consultancies and concrete interventions inspired by Landry and his insights are to be taken as effective indicators, then the creative cities thesis can only be judged a huge success. That it managed to be so without asking difficult questions about material infrastructures, participations and inequalities, or by challenging prevailing assumptions about the limits or restrictions to creative growth, can only be taken as evidence of the disconnect that rapidly emerged between the desires and understandings of city governments and growth coalitions, and the more critical readings of the developing cultural sector and its academic supporters. Landry was, of course, merely the harbinger of a coming trend. Subsequently, Richard Florida and his ‘creative class’ (2002) thesis stood out as the apotheosis of a kind of pyrrhic victory by advocates of culture; getting creativity to the ‘top table’ of policy making came at the cost of renouncing all arguments outside that of economic growth. The cultural sector stood open-mouthed as the most heinously commercial up-market leisure and consumption development packages were rolled out in the name of culture.
Limits to the Local? Aporias and Counter-Narratives

While we and many others – widely drawn from cultural studies, geography, sociology and planning - spent time working alongside (and often within) the kinds of frameworks then being set by the ‘clusters’ and ‘creative cities’ agendas, it was becoming apparent just how far the study of local cultural industries was becoming constrained by its limited instrumental purpose. At this point we - like those others - began to ask the more difficult or nagging questions. These took different forms, but tended to query the (persistently sketchy) basis of many of the empirical claims being made for the cultural or creative sector, and to raise concerns about the meaningful definition of culture within a more (unapologetically) economistic set of rhetorics and framings. Yet, also, of more overriding concern, were those core questions of cultural studies – where were the cultural (or) creative industries now leading us, socially or politically? These questions began to be explored within four relatively discrete (but also overlapping) fields of enquiry.

Uneven Development

First noticed was the highly uneven nature of the urban cultural economy (e.g. see Oakley, 2006). London (like Paris, New York and Los Angeles) loomed large over lesser metropolitan centres, which in turn looked out over the flatlands of those small towns and unfashionable, more peripheral, cities which often appeared desperate in their pursuit of the creative tag. Local clusters and ‘creative ecosystems’ found it difficult to thrive and sustain, internally or in partnership with the core cities or commercial centres. But even within the metropolis it was the city centres, repopulated in a warehouse and apartment boom, that mainly benefitted, and not the decaying inner city or the humdrum suburbs. The extent to which residual or non-elite resident populations of cities were gaining from the cultural economy was openly challenged by a set of empirics that revealed the main beneficiaries of the creative turn to be gentrifiers, property-speculators and possessors of mobile capital (for some of the initial critiques see Malanga, 2004; Markusen, 2006; Peck, 2005) – undermining the claims of all those who saw in culture not just the possibilities of capitalist harmony but new forms of progressive urban life driven by Florida’s (2002) ‘Three T’s’ of ‘Technology, Talent and Tolerance’.

Econometrics and the ‘Cultural Case’
Second, the nature of the argument for cultural investments was being differently made at local and national levels. Whilst the local level could build in image, pride of place, the ‘embedding’ of economic activity in culture, community cohesion and other comforting (and desirable) ambitions, these would not cut the same at national level, where a more assuredly ‘hard’ economic case had to be made. Indeed, the core raison d’etre of the neologism ‘creative industries’ was almost entirely state-economic – designed to make a link to the software and computing industries that (in almost all territories) provided the lion’s share of total ‘creative’ employment, and which allowed the sector to be taken seriously by finance ministries and government accountants (Garnham, 2005; Oakley and O’Connor, 2015b). But of course the emerging dominance of neo-liberal thinking meant that any cultural rationale – however much it was woven into a strategic economic argument – was radically reduced in scope to those of Gross Value Added (and thus tax), employment and export (see Hesmondhalgh et al, 2015; McGuigan, 2005; Schlesinger, 2007). The rest was simply PR (or ‘soft power’). Hence we witnessed two decades of relentless econometrics in which ‘creativity’ was held to be the defining characteristic of culture and the key conduit whereby its economic benefits could feed into the wider national economy (e.g. DCMS, 2008; NESTA 2012; 2013). The paucity of this argument is now widely accepted, even by its former supporters (Bakhshi and Cunningham, 2016).

Culture and Civic Value

Somewhere along the way, maybe just as they were arriving at the ‘front door’ of government (Hartley, 2005, p. 19), the idea that the cultural (or now ‘creative’) industries might serve some (non-economic) civic or public good got somewhat lost (Turner, 2012). For sure, we saw that many of those engaged in popular (and local) cultural production had been able to challenge regressive social structures and the assumptions that held them together. Certainly, many inside (and outside) of government saw value in the potential for local culture (and its flotilla of enterprises) to ‘solve’ problems of social and economic exclusion, and to support political engagement. Yet, on the other hand, we were learning from a new kind of cultural studies which had re-written the history of public policy away from liberal and universalist notions of the (Habermasian) public sphere and citizenship, towards a more pragmatic but disenchanted understanding informed by Foucault and
governmentality (see Bennett, 1998; Miller and Yudice, 2002; Lewis and Miller, 2002, McGuigan, 2004). At the forefront, writers such as Tony Bennett and Toby Miller were beginning to suggest that culture was primarily a means of government getting subjects to act in accordance with the wishes of government. Furthermore, such approaches overlapped with various streams of postmodern and poststructuralist interpretation which tended to regard cultural value as inherently suspect since it could always be shown to be ‘partial’ (and thus ‘exclusionary’), or else premised on the concealment of a strategic interest (see Bourdieu, 1984; also Banks, 2017; Keat, 2000). A scepticism towards ‘universals’ took particular form in the arguments that were being made by John Hartley, Stuart Cunningham and others where, given the absence of agreed standards for judging cultural value, and the dethroning of artistic critique, the market was seen to provide at least as good a way as any other for offering more reasonably efficient and democratic forms of adjudication between the tastes and goods of culture, and so could be a presumptive basis of a cultural or creative industries policy (e.g. see Cunningham, 2009; Hartley, 2005; and O'Connor, 2009). Applied at the local level, cities and cultural districts were simply another amalgam of market actors, hustling and competing for footholds in a global economy that writers such as Cunningham, Potts et al (2008) and Flew (2012) understood as a variegated and complex landscape (a ‘Rorschach blot’ in Cunningham’s terms) that could no longer sustain what was presumed to be a ‘false’ opposition between economic and cultural motives and intentions.

Many of these writers wanted, in different ways, to take down the pretentions of cultural activists (and cultural studies) to some inherently emancipatory narrative of culture. But perhaps in retrospect, they need not have bothered; once New Labour (and other Centre Left parties) disappeared into the shadows, and austerity was enthroned, the new settings of governance were more distinctly revealed. Government no longer seemed to need culture to govern but could now position the national citizen as primarily homo economicus. As William Davies has recently charted (2015), it was the sovereign, choice-driven, efficiency-maximising subject of the market around which government services, including culture, came to be organised – regardless of what was happening in cultural policy and cultural industry studies. Some of the consequences of this are now being felt in a resurgence of
culture – sometimes deeply regressive – in direct opposition to such ‘common-sense’ economic rationality (as we discuss below).

Cultural Work

For the previous two decades the value of cultural or creative work has tended to be reduced to crude headline estimates of revenues, rising employment and GVA - a contestable set of statistics that have rarely convinced either the governments that have produced them, or the critics. But neither, contrary to earlier promises, have the anticipated benefits of such work been made to materialise for the wider community. Outside of major cities, and the executive ranks, the generalised picture has become one of limited opportunity and low pay, long hours and self-sacrifice amidst an entrenched and relentless precariousness that demands nothing other than a total commitment to work (Ross, 2000; Gill and Pratt, 2008). Indeed, after two decades of promotion and investment in creative clusters, quarters, hubs and partnerships, in flexible contracts, non-hierarchical working and portfolio careers, in arts education, employability, work placements and internships, in diversity and equality, in managed workspaces and unmanaged workspaces, in innovation toolkits and creative consultants, and in all that is ‘free’, ‘gifted’ and ‘open’, we find that work in the creative economy remains deeply unequal and profoundly unjust (Banks, 2017; Conor, Gill and Taylor, 2015; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; McRobbie, 2016; Oakley and O’Brien 2016; Ross, 2013). In the UK the dominance of London as a source of cultural jobs, and the stagnancy of ‘growth’ in regional cities, has further disadvantaged those poorer and more geographically marginal populations who might wish to pursue careers in cultural work – a core-periphery relation common to a range of European states (e.g. see Bayliss, 2007; Vivant, 2013) and increasingly a trope in ‘populist’ attacks on metropolitan elites.

The bitter irony, of course, is that while the ‘creative economy’ was developing within an economic discourse that aggressively promoted the virtues of free markets, entrepreneurship and competitive individualism, it was also presented as an idealized productive space where people with talents and imagination were at liberty to pursue their interests in benign, inclusive environments marked by openness and equal opportunity. In this way, creativity became a key ‘doctrine’ (Schlesinger, 2007)
of the conjuncture. But we would also add that while this doctrine has failed to generate a fair distribution of cultural and creative work, it also served to obscure (or discredit) some of the more pluralistic and politically-informed understandings of ‘culture’ (and ‘cultural industries’) hitherto associated with the much longer history of symbolic production: understandings that have often been motivated by a strong sense of critique of the kinds of assumptions and conditions that now routinely underpin creative economy hype.

And so….

…and where are we now? Certainly, looking back, we can see that the initial ‘fast policy’ success of the creative industries might have made it easy (for us and others) to overlook or underestimate some of the less appealing innovations that were emerging as equally central to the zeitgeist. These included the gradual colonisation of our everyday language (and institutional behaviour) by economic reasoning; the (re)privatisation of the mediatised public sphere under the rubric of ‘de-regulation’ and choice; the restructuring of cultural policy around the consumer rather than the citizen; the deepening socio-cultural shift from collective to individual identities and values, and a pervasive (and global) drive to strip out the costs (and power) of labour. ‘Neo-liberalism’, as it became known, offered a very different sense of ‘reflexive modernization’ to the one we (and so many others) first imagined to be progressively transforming the city of Manchester and other cities and cultures beyond.

For sure, while many of the contradictions and problems of the creative economy were quite quickly recognised (e.g. see Hesmondhalgh and Pratt, 2005; McRobbie, 1998; 2002; Ross, 2000), too often these concerns were then side-lined (especially in government, in industry and in the academic mainstream), with the overall effect of helping to obscure (as well as set real limits upon) any discussion as to how far the creative industries and their cities could contribute to the making of a better, more just and inclusive kind of economy and society (Oakley, 2006). Instead the creative industries became instituted as an exemplary manifestation of the wider ideology of contemporary capitalism; offering cities and cultural workers the seductive promise of meaningful work in harmonious spatial settings (such as the ‘cluster’), but in
service of an economic system where the primary aim was not to socialise the products of culture for equalitarian gains, but to orient the majority of individuals to flexible, perpetual and minimally-paid employment in the interests of profit. What was also overlooked here by advocates and planners were the connections between these local SME ecologies and the large, global corporations upon whose dynamics much of the fortune of these local clusters depended. Yet as political economy (and some of cultural studies) always argued, it was perhaps these big players who were really (and increasingly) assuming control of our local creative fates (Miller et al, 2003; Fitzgerald, 2015; Mosco, 1996; O'Connor, 2004; Wayne, 2003).

Today, then, amongst the most urgent questions is how might we recover some sense of progressive purpose and value in contexts where local cultural economies have been exposed as, at best, unable to deliver on anything like the promises invested in them, and, at worst, expressions of the bankruptcy of an idea that has long since lost any sense of energy and direction? What could – and should – our urban cultural economies do, or aspire to be? These are not easy questions to answer. There is certainly no simple reboot or recovery position. And while the crisis has put cultural values right back on the table this is into a very fraught and complex situation – where even the erstwhile poachers may be perceived to have turned into gamekeepers, as one ex-Labor prime minister wrote recently in the Australian context:

Australian politics has become a parallel universe. The insiders (representing no more than 10 per cent of society) are mainly cultural producers, working in the media, advertising, design, arts and education industries — as well as politics. Among the other 90 per cent there’s genuine rancour about this elite domination of information and culture… Make no mistake: the revolt of the outsiders in Australia is a revolt against the cultural producers (Latham, 2017).

Let us not try to unpick the nonsense of this claim, but simply note that it suggests that the focus on the ‘cultural case’ may no longer wash in contexts where concerns about ‘liberal elites’ and their ‘bubbles’ seems to diminish any kind of progressive or collective understanding of what culture (and cultural industry) is, or what it can be or do. But, as we now also know, neither will the old economic arguments wash, since the market has proven unable to deliver on its ‘democratic’ promises. Indeed, the
reliance on market efficiency as the founding value of a polity is now clearly unravelling, and not least because the economy is so badly faltering. Embedded in the Brexit scenario, and the resurgence of the Right in Europe (and USA beyond), has been the unwillingness of large sections of the population either to recognise economic ‘reasonableness’ or to make their choices based primarily upon it. However ‘regressive’ this rejection might be in metropolitan eyes, it reflects a large deficit in public value, one easily filled by less progressive cultural narratives oriented around national sovereignty (‘taking back control’), ‘protecting our ways of life’, and various forms of cultural scapegoating and exclusion. Where this leaves an emancipatory, progressive vision of cultural value – and the cultural industries within it – is a question cultural studies must once again address.

More broadly, cities and the cultural economy are no longer part of a millennial economic upswing in which ‘ideas make money’ (Howkins, 2001) but in a situation where the confrontation with a catastrophic ecological crisis coincides with a new technological revolution (VR, IoT, all-pervasive robots, computers and communications) in which an abundance of cultural experiences, material goods and leisure time seems feasible (but also unsettling) in ways not witnessed since the early 1970s (Byrnjolfsson and McAfee, 2014; Frase, 2016; Mason, 2015). Yet there is absolutely no evidence to suggest that either the crisis or these socio-technological possibilities will be realised in way that accords with a democratic or egalitarian human future. Quite the contrary (Frase, 2016). How will cultural industries contribute to - or try to challenge or mitigate – these emerging realities? Researchers on cities, cultural participation and cultural work are perhaps closest to such issues, raising issues of sustainability, social justice, the organisation of labour, and the relationship between work, leisure, and collective and individual fulfilment. These and those many others seeking to uncouple the cultural economy from a narrow agenda based on the unbridled virtues of the market and capitalistic growth – coming out of feminist, ecological and development economics – are going to have to exert more impact on the kinds of ‘no-growth’ ‘free production’ that is now beginning to characterise the cultural sector (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Mason, 2015).

But there are some even older, perhaps archaic, questions, back on the table. The cultural industries have long been concerned with the productive aspects of culture –
poiesis – creativity, the entrepreneur, innovation, the bringing into being of the new. They have thrived, as Marshall Berman (1984) knew, as part of our modern, Faustian bargain. But alongside poiesis was always Kant's aesthesis, the audience, the democratic universal, the possibilities of a unified 'sense' which makes society possible. We need poiesis, and in some respects we have had a lot of it – though for some a little too much and too fast. Perhaps it is time for more aesthesis? On what grounds now might we seek a culture in common – not the hard billiard ball cultural sphere of the nation-state but a space in which we can both be open and state our belonging. And what kind of system of local (and global) cultural production, participation and distribution could underpin such a commons– what would that even look like? Perhaps to try and imagine this ought now to be the focus of our collective energies, whether we find ourselves outside – or inside - the whale.

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