

Abstract: Panel Discussion 3A-b of the Congress on the subject of “The Contribution of Creativity to Sustainable Development”

Hangzhou International Congress, 15-17 May 2013, China

Prof. Justin O’Connor
Chair of Communications and Cultural Economy
Monash University, Australia

In my contribution I want to first question the notion of ‘Creativity’, for it is not at all clear what we mean by this, and we cannot assume it is always ‘a good thing’. Second, I will question the emphasis on sustainability; this is often reduced to questions of ecological sustainability and even the reduction of CO2 emissions. I suggest we need to focus on socio-economic transformations and the nature of the political will that would be required to bring about these transformations. I will explore these two issues in the light of each other.

Creativity is an extremely open-ended concept. It can mean anything from humanity’s ability to transform themselves and the world to the fairly mundane notion of ‘problem solving’. In the context of a conference on ‘culture and sustainability’ and this specific panel (The 2013 Creative Economy Report) ‘creativity’ here is invoked in terms of art, culture and the creative industries. These, I suggest, are not the same things.

It is not the case that the creative industries are the economic/ commercial ‘application’ of art and culture. Of course art and culture have economic dimensions and artists have often been successful entrepreneurs (Charles Dickens, Pablo Picasso, Andy Warhol, for example). However, first, art and culture have been promoted by governments for reasons other than the economic and second, art and culture have as often as not been set against the economic, the instrumental – they represent ideas and practices that cannot be reduced to exchange value.

Creative industries have been promoted as the economisation of culture. More, they have drawn on the ideas of artistic creativity in order to somehow ‘democratise’ this creativity and make it available not just to artists but to the population as a whole – most particularly in terms of their economic activity. Creativity is to become a source of entrepreneurial inspiration and a drive to innovation.

There are many problems with this reduction to economic – and the 2013 Creative Economy Report highlights these in an incisive and effective way. Here I want to make the equation between this version of ‘creativity’ – drawn from the idea of artistic creativity – and the wider drive to novelty and innovation that is embedded at the heart of capitalism. This Faustian bargain of endless change, endless novelty, endless growth has led to great material benefits but has also led us to ecological catastrophe and socio-economic disruption. The rise of the creative industries has highlighted this connection: since the 1970s it has been

immaterial goods and services which have been the focus of economic growth theorists and those industries which produce signs and symbols have moved from being luxuries to essential drivers of growth. Hence the change of status for artists from bohemian outcasts to Schumpeterian innovators in the last 30 years.

In this version of creativity, sustainability is precisely what *cannot* be an outcome of creativity. Creativity feed unsustainable socio-economic activities. Some countries have promoted the creative industries as 'clean' – the weightless economy, the production and distribution of symbolic goods. This is now shown to be false – not only does it generate e-waste and push the manufacturing/ packaging/ logistical activities out of sight, it encourages the sort of endless consumption of the new that lies behind the sustainability crisis. Clean cities are dirty rural hinterlands, polluted extraction economies, overburdened transport ecologies etc.

Thus part of our task here is surely to reign in some versions of creativity – to root it in sustainable social-economic and environmental practices. It will mean a radical rethink of 'creative industries' as part of the problem not the solution.