



Creative cities: Tensions within and between social, cultural and economic development

A critical reading of the UK experience

Andy C. Pratt

Department of Culture, Media and Creative Industries (CMCI), King's College London, Chesham Building, Strand Campus, London WC2R 2LS, UK

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a situated and pragmatic analysis of the state of the art of creative cities policy thinking regarding the governance of the relationship between the cultural and creative economy and urbanization. It argues for the need to pay attention to the context, history and regulatory forms of creative cities and be very cautious in our desire to draw wider lessons based upon policy transfer. The paper examines the UK case as illustrative of the organic and fractured nature of policy initiatives: and, advises against a single policy model. There are many instrumental uses to which creative city policies can be put; and critically, there are a number of intrinsic uses as well. This paper, and the literature more generally, supports the view that the balance of attention has been toward instrumental uses of culture and creativity. It is argued that we need to re-balance policy and academic concern to the intrinsic value of the cultural and creative field.

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Introduction

The aims of this paper are both negative and positive. The positive ones are to plot a course, and to open up the field of study, of creativity, culture and the social and economic life of the city. However, in proposing a positive aim one must acknowledge the state of the art, and the dominant discourse, of the current debate. The paper has two negative premises. First, it rejects the simplistic association of the creative economy with a teleological representation of economic development, just one step beyond, or an elaboration of, the knowledge economy. Second, the paper is set against the premise that creative and cultural activities are simply forms of attraction for a mobile elite, or as an instrumental means of differentiating one place from another.

The paper highlights the value of acknowledging the subtleties of historical and locally specific practices of cultural and creative activities. It is argued that only by taking such an analytic step can we understand the pro-

cesses animating creative cities, and accordingly begin to develop a range of policy responses to them. This is not only a case of conceptual re-alignment and policy innovation (as will be discussed here); but, as is discussed elsewhere, it presents significant challenges to policy delivery and expertise (Jeffcutt & Pratt, 2002; Pratt, 2005, 2007, 2009b).

The paper stresses that the creative city policy field is a broad one including many objectives. There are sound arguments for the instrumental uses of culture and creativity other than those discussed here; this paper, however, argues that all policies should have clear and discrete objectives and that they should be evaluated on those terms. Failure to achieve policy objectives is unfortunate, but it can be learned from. Confused policy objectives and inadequate evaluation achieves no scientific end; and, as often as not simply serves to re-inforce existing prejudices.¹

E-mail address: andy.pratt@kcl.ac.uk

¹ Prejudices which are commonly configured on the basis of an outmoded notion of culture and creativity as inherently market failures.

Creative cities – the very idea

One of the major obstacles to analyses of creative cities is the term itself. There has been a significant upsurge in writings and debates about the notion of creativity, the creative class and the creative city (Bianchini & CLES, 1988; Bianchini & Parkinson, 1993; Currid, 2007; Florida, 2002, 2004; Florida & Tinagali, 2004; Hall, 1998, 2000; Hutton, 2004; Landry, 2000, 2006; Lloyd, 2006; Molotch, 1996; Scott, 2000, 2007; Wood & Landry, 2007). The problem is that these authors use the term in many different ways, and policies that are built upon assumptions rooted in these disparate knowledges, have diverse objectives. As these terms have filtered through to the popular media they have lost their precision and specificity and collapsed into more or less the same generic or bland idea (Peck, 2005; Pratt, 2008a). Today the notion of a creative city stands as much for a political and social mantra as an urban, social or economic policy, or even an aspiration. Within the field of urban policy the notion of a creative city has spread like wildfire, but unlike a wildfire, it appears that everyone wants to have a creative city.

The objective of this paper is to step back from this maelstrom and take a more considered view of the issue. It is of course important to return to conceptual foundations; however, we have to acknowledge that a rather more vaporous version of creative cities is abroad, and it forms part of everyday policy discourse which has real effects in terms of the expectations that it establishes. Thus, any discussion of the terms must carefully engage with both conceptual as well as popular discursive articulations.

As part of this introduction I will briefly point to some of the narrative strands that constitute the loose and often contradictory lexicon that is creative cities. It may help to separate these into five main themes. First, and foremost, is the notion of creativity. The way that this enters the debate is manifold. The notion has a humanistic root, in the valuing of individual creativity/ humanity. However, this has been powerfully re-articulated in recent years linked to economic innovation and competitiveness (Pratt, 2008b). Thus, creativity is now commonly viewed as a key economic characteristic. Loosely coupled these two factors make a strong underpinning for creativity as a universal positive aspiration (Pratt & Jeffcutt, 2009b).

Second, and related to the economic strand of thought already referred to is a teleological, developmentalist, or modernization, thesis that suggests that the knowledge economy, of which the creative economy is figured as a star element, is the highest point of economic development. Thus, all cities, regions and nations are encouraged to be more creative. Third, another articulation of this economic strand is that cultural activity is not of primary importance in directed economic value generation; rather, it plays a supportive or facilitating role: such as attracting, or differentiating cities, in relation to foreign direct investment.

Fourth, is the idea that the creative, or cultural, economy is somehow more inclusive: usually in the sense of a representation of non-capitalistic values; or as a humanistic counterbalance to economic accumulation. This is the field that we can see in the discussion of the nurturing power of neighborhood and social cohesion through joint endeavor of cultural projects. Fifth, and a mainly silent strand, is one that runs

counter to the latter. It focuses on the requisite skills and resources to produce the best, or most outstanding, creative and cultural output. Commonly this is considered as elitist, or self-serving, and certainly non-instrumental.

As discussed above, there is a fractured and loose web of justifying rationales for the creative city, just as there are a very wide variety of 'creative cities' in practice. Moreover, there is a complex and shifting matrix of justification and realities. Thus, it is problematic to assume a direct correspondence between aims and objectives, policies and impacts. Commonly, objectives are either unclear or undefined, processes are not isolated, and relationships between causes and effects not established, let alone evaluated. As is common in such policy making the fall back position is commonly onto the notion of 'best practice'. This is itself a problematic notion unless it is situated within a coherent framework of analysis that facilitates systematic comparison and contrasting of events. As is noted elsewhere, it has been common, perhaps as much for political justification and legitimization as that of policy results, to turn to the example of the UK as the best practice (Evans, 2006).

An uninformed observer might find such a state of affairs puzzling. Arguably, it is difficult to simply distill or identify a single UK model, accordingly there is no explicit policy template. So, what is being copied? Furthermore, policy transfer is commonly an exercise in wishful thinking rather than practice. Copying existing policy texts is reassuring, but it is doomed to failure as we know that the same policies produce different effects and impacts under various institutional and social, cultural and economic contextual situations. So, even if the model existed, was copied and implemented 'properly', it would still produce a range of different outcomes.

Such is the challenge; a problem that is by no means unique to the topic of creative cities. Furthermore, despite these issues it does not follow that all ideas of creative cities are flawed. Rather, it suggests the need for careful attention to what is particular, what is genuinely transferable, and what form it may take. One final aspect of this debate is simply the social and political popularity of the notion of the creative city. Populations are attracted to the idea, and politicians love it: who would want to aspire to be 'uncreative'? Hence, we can see how such a combination of circumstances can view evidence based approaches, or academic reflections, cast aside, or set aside as the impatience of implementation triumphs. Thus, we need to add a plea not to discard the idea of the creative city on the basis of the many actually existing 'examples'. Setting aside this meta-critique, the focus of the remainder of this paper is to look at practice and what is commonly taken for 'creative city' policy, and to offer both a critique on its own terms, as well as offering a way of thinking more critically about the whole concept.

Why creative cities: the challenge

The notion of creative cities is not singular, but multiple; it has many overlapping roots and implications: some are complementary, and some contradictory. As I will outline in this section, the common approaches offer varieties of instrumentalism. But, what is lacking is a positive (intrinsic) cultural and creative industries rationale. Second, these

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