

The Politics of Creativity.

A Conversation with Deborah Stevenson and Justin O'Connor

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Deborah Stevenson und Justin O'Connor

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Understanding creativity, as it is used in policy contexts, demands an ontological and grammatical shift – an *uncontrolled equivocation* – to improvise on a concept introduced by the anthropologist Viveiros de Castro (2002). In his version, equivocation is structured, or under control. “It concerns the process involved in the translation of the ‘native’s’ practical and discursive concepts into the terms of the anthropologist’s...” (4-5). The art of the researcher is in making use of the equivocal switch. Inaccuracies and blunders can occur – if, for example, the researcher fails, through error or inexperience, to properly translate concepts, which anyway will always remain incommensurable to some degree. The aspect of control is part of the anthropologist’s art and duty as a researcher – that is – to understand the inevitability and opportunities of equivocation and to proceed ethically and responsibly in pursuit of knowledge.

Imagine instead that a concept, such as creativity, is used haphazardly by researchers, policymakers, cultural workers, entrepreneurs, the media, and the lay public, with little acknowledgement that it can mean wildly different things to different people in different contexts, and therefore with different, and unanticipated outcomes. Further, that the slipperiness of the term may advantage some groups and individuals over others such as when it is used to promote market-driven cultural production (SVAŠEK/MEYER 2016; BHARUCHA 2010; GARNHAM 2005; LÖFGREN 2001), or to induce creative individuals to adapt, often at expense of their own economic stability, to rapid changes in technology and labor (SVAŠEK/MEYER 2016; LEACH 2007). I use the term ‘uncontrolled equivocation’ as a beginning point for thinking about creativity’s role in contemporary policy and politics, where there is little or no translation – meaning, little effort to structure compatibility around

the use of the expression, especially as a modifier to ‘industries,’ ‘development,’ ‘sector,’ ‘workers,’ and other such terms.

A frequent criticism is that terminology in creative industries policy and related areas “lacks rigor and is frequently inconsistent and confusing” (GALLOWAY/DUNLOP 2007: 17). Creativity is neither positive nor negative on its own. There is the assumption in cultural policy, however, that creativity will quite naturally lead to something good and desirable. A mediocre work of art could, nonetheless, be creative. And many creative solutions to problems may – even so – be unsound, unethical, unsustainable, or costly. Creativity is not the single ingredient that tips the scale toward what is appropriate, suitable, or good.

Using the discourse of ‘creative city’ as just one example, the weakness of the concept is that it has to be sufficiently dilute, or must exclude “unpalatable” definitions in order to be acceptable for “a liberal audience of policy makers and politicians” (CHATTERTON 2000: 396). The discourse of creativity also often ignores inherent ideologies. The question of ‘whose creativity?’ might be important to pose given that those who define it, and who are in charge of design and implementation of its policies, may have different aims than the individual artists and citizens subject to those policies.

Despite considerable documentation of problems around creative industries, creative development, and creative cities policy making, these issues remain timely. Creative industries are alive and well, and the network of creative cities continues to expand. As part of this special issue on creativity and cities, I talked with two noted scholars about the role of creativity in urban policy, development, and in the creative cities network. I was especially interested in how creativity operates in a policy context outside of the Western EU and North America.

Deborah Stevenson is Professor of Sociology and Urban Cultural Research at Western Sydney University’s Institute for Culture and Society. Justin O’Connor is Professor of Creative Economy in the School of Creative Industries at University of Southern Australia. Independently, Stevenson and O’Connor have conducted considerable research on cultural policy in the areas of cultural development and creative cities. More recently, they are lead researchers in a project funded by the Australian Research Council entitled: UNESCO and the Making of Global Cultural Policy, for which I am also a collaborator. In the conversation that follows, their comments are transcribed and then interspersed with my

own additional commentary. I began by asking how we should understand the concept *creative city*.

Deborah Stevenson: I don't think there's one way to understand creative cities. I think it's a term that's used as a bit of a catchall for including arts and creative industries in a range of urban redevelopment and city reimagining activities linked to local cultural development contexts. There's a literature that has been quite influential in popularizing the term. But it has come to mean a whole host of things. It kind of bumps up against Richard Florida's work in a lot of cases, but also addresses or speaks to a lot of other issues and themes. That's a roundabout way of not answering your question but, I think there is no simple definition.

Constance DeVereaux: And yet, cities are designated by UNESCO as Creative Cities, as part of a formal network that, at least by intention, is to elevate their profiles and stimulate the economy. Doesn't that suggest a particular understanding of the term?

Stevenson: There are formal designations which is what happens as part of the UNESCO Creative Cities Network where cities apply to be a creative city in different fields: craft and folk art, design, and others. So, cities apply and then they go through an assessment process and those selected are given the title UNESCO Creative City. That's the UNESCO network and that's the one thing we're looking at as part of our current research project – how the process operates, what it means, and how it connects with other programs of UNESCO. But cities on their own behalf can call themselves creative cities as part of their own branding. That happens all the time: creative cities, creative communities, creative towns – some of them formal programs, some of them completely a branding exercise.

Justin O'Connor: I agree it's a catchall definition. I call it 'an imaginary.' It's a broad imagined idea around which certain aspects of policy are assembled, as Deborah suggested, around creative industries, creative classes, and other terms and ideas. It includes new technology, talent innovation, and similar ideas. So, in that wider sense, it's not just a boring policy kind of initiative. It does get a wider buy-in than other kinds of ideas. These are then assembled into policy actions. But, because it's an imaginary and not a single, concrete idea, it gets a wider buy-in. But that's why I think that the designation, Creative Cities, by UNESCO, really does end up being a kind of tedious policy thing. It's very narrow. It's not like the Olympics, which has a huge coalition

going for it. Creative Cities is pretty narrow. For some cities there is a positive acknowledgement in saying “We’ve become a Creative City.” In other cities nobody’s got any idea what it’s about.

The ‘narrowness’ O’Connor mentions has to do with UNESCO’s practice of declaring a city ‘creative’ within a single area of pursuit. Torino, Italy for example is a Creative City of Design by reason of its aesthetically appealing and well-engineered products such as automobiles and textiles. Jingdezhen, China, known for its porcelain production, is a designated Creative City of Folk Arts and Crafts. Iowa City in the United States is recognized for literature, and Busan, Korea for film. Since its creation in 2004, UNESCO’s Creative City Network has designated 246 cities worldwide. Of those, 66 have been added since October 2019. According to O’Connor, acceptance into the network confers brand status on a city and follows an earlier tradition of recognizing cities for their cultural profiles. Both O’Connor and Stevenson seem to suggest that designation is more about marketing than it is about concrete action.

O’Connor: It means you’ve got Creative City status. Before Creative Cities, there was the City of Culture, which has been going since the 1950s. When Glasgow became a City of Culture it was the first that didn’t follow the mold of the traditional cultural city, like Venice or Rome or Paris, for example. Glasgow was an industrial city that said, “Oh no, but we’re also a city of culture.” So, it does have its roots in this transformative idea of culture and creativity that would lead cities to want to be part of it. In the 1980s, when the idea of creativity in policy began, it was about the idea of transformation around new forms of governance, new ways of understanding the city, going beyond Western instrumental rationality. There was a much broader idea that got boiled down, by the 2000s, to a pretty narrow and instrumental idea of creative industries. The original idea included arts and culture and urban regeneration, but also transformation in land use, bringing old industrial areas back into use. It was about reviving old communities. It was arts and culture in a quite broad sense, with cultural industries in there but not necessarily central. Arts and culture have kind of remained there as part of the core idea. It’s just that the focus has become very instrumental. It’s an economic thing, a tourism thing. And it’s a kind of policy branded thing.

Stevenson: The creative city label is ‘catchy.’ It works in a marketing speak sort of way. I think there are all kinds of issues to be discussed

around creativity as a policy tool. But Creative City is probably just a kind of convenient label more than anything terribly critical.

O'Connor: I would say specifically the Creative Cities were named after the creative industries. Creative industries were so named for two reasons: to link to the emerging, innovative dot-com agenda – as it was called then – the digital agenda of innovation that came out of the United States. It was a growing thing in the 90s. It was connecting the digital agenda into the notion of culture and artists in a left of field sort of innovation way where aesthetics and creativity were part of the surge. The second link was that creativity is a capacity. Culture is a complicated thing. It has to do with a wide range of shared meanings that really have nothing to do with economics. Creativity is a capacity that one can pull out of culture to be measured, to be proxied, if you like as Richard Florida does. And it becomes easy to set it in that kind of landscape with its mapping and its indexes, in a whole range of ways that you can measure creativity. The concept of creativity fits much better into neo-liberal thinking, by virtue of its seeming measurability, than the concept of culture.

The policy origins suggested by Stevenson and O'Connor are fairly well documented. On the popular side is the study by Richard Florida whose widely read book, *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002), posits that cities can effect an economic turnaround by attracting a sector of the population he termed “the creative class.” Members, who are often simply called “creatives,” work primarily in design, tech industries, entertainment media (film, gaming, music), and a variety of other commercial enterprises, but also as artists and as cultural workers, typically in NGOs or state institutions. Despite the inclusion of arts and culture as part of the creativity mix, however, they typically receive less attention and support than more commercially lucrative areas like design, technology, and media. Creative policies favor the entrepreneurial individual more so than the individual artist.

The release of Florida's book came at a critical time when many cities and nations were seeking ways to revive their economies in the post-industrial era and when the concept of “creative economy” (HOWKINS 2001) was gaining ground. Creativity, “has intuitive appeal” (CHATTERTON 2000: 393) for contemporary cities that, as “anachronistic giants,” struggled to restructure themselves from their industrial past to develop forward-looking economies (ibid). Arts and culture were repositioned

from “tools of citizen formation” into serviceable “core components” of the economy (ROSS 2009: 30).

Such efforts were needed, however, to reverse what became known as “the lost decade” for development (UNESCO 1993: 2). The 1980s were a period of stagnation, characterized by negative growth, declines in per capita income, and high unemployment in many parts of the world, demanding a radical “reshaping of practice” (ibid). The Lost Decade, according to Landry “left many countries and cities flailing as they searched for new answers to creating a purpose for themselves and jobs, whilst their cities were physically locked into their past” (2005: 4). Economic downturns also produced wider disparities between rich and poor than at any time since the end of World War 2. In the face of seemingly insurmountable problems, the need for new, creative, innovative solutions seemed a given. As Stevenson has noted in this conversation, creativity is a catchy term. Arguing that we need to be more creative to solve world problems, increase economic growth, and reverse downturns in development sounds good as far as it goes, given that older methods and solutions were seen to have failed. No one would argue the case for less creativity. Despite good intentions by early proponents, creativity has since become the focal point of much hype, however. According to the World Economic Forum, “radical creative thinking changes the world” (GUNNSTEINSDÓTTIR: 2012). It is about transformation “on a grand scale” and making “what was impossible” possible (ibid). The results of such grand thinking, however, have not entirely paid off.

A “political mantra” since the 1980s (SVAŠEK/MEYER 2016: 18), creativity has a knotty history. Seen through the lens of assorted disciplines, it is situated as the foundation for utopian visioning (O’CONNOR 2020), as a means for redressing inequalities and balancing against mindless consumerism (LÖFGREN 2001), as a vehicle for economic growth (PRATT 1997), a stimulating basis for urban development (LANDRY 1990; LANDRY/BIANCHINI 1995; FLORIDA 2002), and also as a means for entrenching inequalities and reinforcing neo-liberal values in which everything, including culture, can be monetized, and where contemporary society is “formulated, operated and maintained with creativity as the source of progress” (MOULD 2018). In the 21st century, creativity has also come to be seen as an essential feature in urban planning and design. Despite high expectations for transformation of society, business, and city development however, it has not been “the miraculous road to... growth and affluence that is so abundantly claimed these days” (LEVITT 2002).

Why then, does creativity persist in international and national policies, in the form of creative industries, creative cities, creative entrepreneurship strategies, and in local efforts to affect urban development and transform job markets? Is uncontrolled equivocation a trivial reality in creativity policy or a factor to be recognized and accounted for in policy and research? Stevenson comments on her encounters with Florida's work as it was adopted in Australia, while O'Connor discusses a broader historical context for the term.

Stevenson: It was the work of Richard Florida, in the town councils I've worked with in New South Wales. He came on the scene and it energized common people working in community cultural development. It gave them a language that they really latched on to – not so much the Creative Class, but the notion of creativity as a tool. And, then the Creative City, which didn't have anything to do with Florida, but still kind of connected with what he was talking about. It did kind of turbo charge a lot of momentum around the arts and community cultural development.

O'Connor: Some of that was quite understandable. Many people were really pushing so that culture would be taken seriously by policymakers. Most of the cultural sector for the previous twenty years was trying to make the claim that arts and culture mattered, economically. Introducing creativity was a way of proving, of saying "there it is in black and white. There are the graphs. There are the indexes. There are the facts and figures." And I think that was a very strong argument that brought a lot of people into accepting the benefit of arts and culture on those terms.

Stevenson: Previously the focus on was on tourism connected with culture – cultural tourism. Now, there was this new idea. Suddenly the people in arts and culture had a language that got traction with local councilors, with local politicians, with economists. Creativity just kind of caught on.

O'Connor: It's a complicated story. Creative Cities is one thing, but there's also the creative industries idea that in some ways started with former Prime Minister Tony Blair, who came up with the concept of Creative Britain which was then pushed very much by the British Council. They're a global organization with centers all over the world. English-language training is their bread and butter, but they do a lot of other things, and they are everywhere. They promoted creative industries as their own branding exercise wherever the British Council was. Hong Kong picked it up. Then Taiwan. Then Singapore. Similar things

happened in Africa in the Anglophone African countries. So, a very strong international push for these ideas through the British Council brought creative industries to the Global South. It was an attractive idea that cities in that part of the world grabbed hold of. I think there is a deeper story there which is related to the post-Asian financial crisis. What happened at the end of the 90s was a reassessment of Western global dominance and looking at the effects of globalization. Then there was this new creativity push – creative industries – from the West. It is very much a Western idea. I think that for Asia, just to look at that part of the world specifically, there may have been a sudden awareness of America and western ideas of innovation becoming much more powerful and wanting to find a way to capture that.

Stevenson: That's a really good point actually about the role of the British Council. And I have to say Australia was part of that too. The US, apart from Richard Florida, has not really driven the international agenda around creative industries and creativity the way the British, and UNESCO, and the Australians have. The US has been much more inwardly focused, I think.

DeVereaux: How do you reconcile the values of creative industries and creative cities with things like cultural identity and cultural sustainability, which UNESCO is claiming as priorities? Are these various aims working at cross purposes? Can they be reconciled, or are they necessarily opposed because of the economic factors involved?

Stevenson: Yes, I think they are at cross purposes. UNESCO Creative Cities Network – UCCN – is actually not a particularly complex idea. I think the complexity is what's going on more broadly in UNESCO and how that tries to articulate with UCCN. What I've been interested in looking at is some of the retrofitting that's going on around creative cities. I mean it was set up predominantly around creative cultural tourism, which had a strong creative industries agenda. Since then, there's been an attempt to rethink and rework the position of what 'creative cities' is actually about. When you look at individual cities and what they're up to, it's not a very complicated agenda. It's unconnected, in many ways, from what UNESCO is trying to achieve more broadly, internationally. But the benefits are very uneven. In some cities there are clearly attempts to have a community cultural development agenda. There are attempts to build up local arts communities. There is definitely a sense that local communities and local cultural groups are very energized and engaged in the process. In many places, however, the lo-

cal government is not engaged any more – the local government, which had actually driven it originally. And so now, in Torino, Italy, you have a situation where they've gone with a populist government so the social democratic government that was there before is gone. Now they've got a populist government that's not at all interested in creative cities. So, you have a situation where arts groups and collectives are trying to find ways to get the local government involved again. That's one little example. But you can go somewhere else and also see that they're completely detached from what's happening on the ground. We spoke last year to the Chair of the Film Directors Guild. He lives in Sydney and he's obviously a film director of some note. He had no idea that Sydney was a UNESCO Creative City of Film. He did not know that very basic piece of information that is about the industry he works in. This kind of unevenness of profile and relevance is absolutely a feature of the UNESCO Creative Cities Network.

O'Connor: It's especially apparent in the case of Creative Cities in the global south. I think that wherever it came from and however it emerged in the rest of the world, it arrived in the global south very much as a western modernizing discourse, and it has a lot of buy-in from governments. They see it as a part of the innovation agenda, and as part of the economic development agenda. But also, across the cultural sector, it's an accepted idea in the wave of modernization. In that sense there is probably something positive there. But I think there is also a strong negative. It's a particular discourse that I call the 'creativity bundle.' It's about networks of entrepreneurs in fluid clusters among a certain milieu in the city. It's become very much a benign dot-com, small state, entrepreneurial view of economic development. So, lots of buy-in from well-educated, middle class kids who see it as a way to get into the economy as small business owners and freelancers working together in pubs, as they tend to do. The best thing states can do, in the view of these entrepreneurial types, is to get out of the way, to open up business for them. These are very strong, subject positions that people occupy. And it's promoted very heavily by British Council who see creative entrepreneurs as key to development in the global south. UNESCO is part of that. Certainly, it's all about creative entrepreneurs on their website. It's highly problematic once you start digging into it because it's absolutely impossible that such a strategy will lead to economic development in any significant way, and at the same time it destroys some older ideas about culture, traditional cultural practices that produce local crafts, for example. It disrupts ideas about community soli-

darity, communal production, non-commercial operations. It replaces it with something akin to the idea that if you sit in a hub in Phnom Penh, drinking a coffee and looking at your laptop, it will somehow connect you with a global subject position of global economic development and modernity. That's highly problematic.

Stevenson: One last thing I'd like to say about the division between the more traditional arts and the more kind of groovy – to use an old fashioned term – edgy, innovative stuff that is promoted as part of creative industries is an interesting one because the Creative Cities Network of UNESCO is not really talking about visual artists or people involved in traditional practices. It's very much focused on things like design and gastronomy. To the extent that it includes such things as First Nations, it's only through folk arts. So, it's worth noting that although creative industries attract artists who bought into the idea of accessing resources or getting what they do recognized, they are actually finding that it isn't happening. They are finding that they are frequently marginalized by the creativity discourse and by the kinds of policies that flow from those discourses.

*O'Connor: I think it represents the last gasp of Western imperialism, in many ways, to promote this kind of thing. I was very struck by Bruno Latour's latest book, *Down to Earth*, in which he talks about globalization-plus and globalization-minus. The idea of globalization-plus, from the 90s, was about multiplying capacities, diversity, and a whole range of things intended to improve the world. Latour suggests that since 2016 we've had globalization-minus, which is the case of Western societies extracting resources from the global south through global supply chains. Globalization is no longer attached to ideas of diversity and reciprocity. It's back to the old idea of extraction. I think, at the moment, that Creative Cities seem to be on that fault line between these two. There are many bright young people who really want to be part of globalization plus and want to do creative things. I'm afraid that creative industries is now deeply buried in globalization minus.*

O'Connor's reference to Bruno Latour, the French sociologist, is appropriate. The focus of his latest book, published in 2018, is globalization and the continuing divisions between rich and poor that it engenders, especially in a decade of climate change. In Latour's earlier work, characterized by his epistemological challenges to the science community, his aim is fixed on how scientific knowledge is acquired. Recalling his

previous work is equally apt in the present context for contemplating the scientific and anecdotal evidence for the benefits of creativity policies. As indicated in this interview, and in other offerings of this special issue, good evidence is sometimes lacking. Latour argued that scientific knowledge should be considered a “product” of competitive social, political, and economic interactions (1984, 1987, 1991) – a precursor to actor network theory. That is surely the case with policy knowledge as well. If knowledge is constructed, often in favor of dominant political and economic networks, it suggests that researchers and policy makers should know more about the knowledge and power networks affecting decision-making in a policy area and the likely consequences of policy actions.

Earlier in world history, the World Commission on Culture and Development asked, “After three decades of development, how far have we got?” (UNESCO 1993), noting that “the gap between the wealthiest and the most destitute nations is widening” (ibid). The question posed, then, differs little from questions posed now about the effects of globalization and strategies – often with creativity at their core – that are intended to close the gaps. If creativity was the tool to end the “phenomenon of exclusion” (GORDON 1980: 245) of the twentieth century, it has yet to be realized in the twenty-first. Despite many positive outcomes, creativity as a core concept in urban policy and development design warrants continued scrutiny. On the micro level, at least one study shows that creativity is “robustly” associated with negative behaviors like dishonesty and ability to justify unethical actions (GINO and ARIELY 2012: 456). Even if we reject the notion that the city is the soul writ large, we should think more vigorously as researchers and policy makers about our policies of creativity and its many equivocations.

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