

Converging western cultural policy debates

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‘There was a need for broad expanses and long ages’ (borrowing a verse from the poet Ángel González’s *Para que yo me llame Ángel González*) for culture to become a central issue in the social sciences and in public policies. The last decades of the 20th century saw the emergence of culture as a scientific domain, as a public-policy issue and even as a range of professional profiles, stretching from a restricted conception of culture as the domain of the arts to the assumption that culture is everywhere, from the limited vision of culture as material to a broad understanding of culture as both material and immaterial, from an idea of better and worse cultures and the imposition on others in terms of supremacy to the protection and promotion of diversity, and from culture conceived as heritage to culture assumed to be permanently changing –the Foucault territory of the struggle to define power in societies–.¹

As contemporary societies progressed in the acquisition of social rights, leisure time became a fact of life, particularly in urban environments, and was accompanied by the state’s growing consciousness about the importance of guaranteeing equal access to cultural resources. **Two paradigms then emerged**: one in the US, assuming a secondary role for the state and promoting both the market and the patronage of cultural institutions; and the other in Europe, stimulating both the market and excellence in cultural production, assigning the state the central responsibility of shaping a national culture to reinforce national identity, almost like a secular ‘cultural religion’.

As the cultural market evolved in the second half of the 20th century, the idea of culture as the result of a brilliant creation had to coexist with a culture produced for rapid consumption, not necessarily marked by excellence but by market expectations and its accessibility to the many. Music records, cheap books, films and television showed not only the ability of culture to become a significant economic sector (as **book publishing** and the press had in previous decades) but also its impact on national public opinion, helping to establish common references, a shared mythology and a collective ‘imaginary’. An excessive foreign cultural presence could annihilate these objectives and cultural policies became the subject of a ‘cultural exception’, while the international markets were progressively opened to bilateral and multilateral agreements. A strong cultural policy to resist the new world-market paradigm became important.

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¹ This analysis was presented as a keynote speech at Zhejiang Sci-Tech University in Hangzhou (China) in December 2018.

Industrial culture was, at the time, identified as the only way to offer a functional leisure for mass societies, combining the political and economic goals of nation states. The emergence of postmodern thought also contributed to emancipating this new 'popular culture' from marginality to the social recognition of the value of its production and consumption as valuable democratic practices.

During this first stage, then: (a) urbanisation, a rising standard of living and the acquisition of social rights led to the appearance of a significant time for leisure; (b) culture became a recognisable economic and industrial player; (c) cultural policies became not only accepted but protected from the deregulation of markets during the 80s and 90s (what is known as the 'cultural exception'); and (d) elitist views about the superiority of 'high culture' were displaced in favour of a more democratic and postmodern view of 'popular culture'.

As a result, cultural policies tended to evolve towards a more active field, with more and more institutions progressively mixing arts, cultural and media assets, and taking into consideration their economic impact. As the French Minister Jack Lang famously said in 1981, 'economy and culture are part of the same fight'.

The emergence of the 'creative industries' mantra comes from a variety of contextual situations that have brought about the desperate search for a new growth paradigm in what are exhausted post-industrial economies. At the end of the 90s the rapidly evolving technological landscape offered the promise of 'new niches' of employment creation in the US and the EU. The 'information superhighway' initiative of Vice-President Al Gore in the US and the Bangemann report in the EU were not only strategies for developing telecommunications networks but also pointed to the core question: that the services flowing from these new infrastructures, the jobs created and the re-emergence of the economy would find in the interconnected cyberspace the promised land of recovery.

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At the same time, the digital revolution is also providing a plethora of new forms of symbolic expressions generated by the digital ecosystem and barely conceivable under the traditional conditions of cultural production. From videogames to digital arts, from software to new Internet platforms, culture was at the doorstep of an enormous change, difficult to frame under the traditional coordinates of culture, many steps ahead of the old struggle between high and popular cultures and hard to fit into the traditional schemas of cultural training, cultural consumption or cultural regulation. This new territory quickly emerged from the interaction of three isolated fields: telecommunications, computer science and culture, quickly identified as the 'convergence'.

The diversification of cultural work, access, production and consumption derived from post-industrial technological changes is behind this promising creative shift, which is both attractive and, at the same time, contradictory. First, because the undefined territory of

creativity makes the definition of public policies initially very difficult in this field. When 20 years ago what was spoken about was basically 'cultural industries' (remembering Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's old oxymoron), later the talk focused on a content economy, a creative sector, a creative economy, a creative class, an ICT (information, communication and technology) economy, copyright industries and an 'orange' economy. In all cases, the primary extension of the cultural field derived from the idea of creativity, but not only. When thinking about industrial design, architecture or fashion, it is very clear that there has been a radical change: the massification of the goods market makes the differentiation a key issue and the ability to produce and connect to cultural and immaterial values becomes a strategic asset. There are objects, or beautiful objects; mere juice squeezers, or artistic marvels designed by the Italian studio of Carlo Alessi; plain motorbikes or vintage Vespas; phones or iPhones. The 'design' and 'branding' (as a process essential to global capitalism) are immaterial elements that are key to understanding both a product's price and its 'exchange value'.

The squeezer, the bike, the phone: the element they have in common is that cultural and creative factors are a vital part of their conception, and it is those elements that make the difference. Especially in price terms. But they are also elements of what Pierre Bourdieu, writing about cultural consumption, termed 'distinction'. Cultural inputs take up a different place in the chain. Traditional cultural industries produced cultural goods, and those goods were different from one another, reusable copies of the original, with an uncertain demand and immaterial, based on symbols (and subsequently easily digitalised).

However, the new creative industries produce goods (and services) that are not necessarily 'cultural', but that also use culture as an element of differentiation, of added value, placing the process of conception at the centre. Of course, we know from decades of cultural studies that norms of taste are social and then built up by varying conditions and actors in the struggle to define reality, in the struggle for power. Thus, the point at which culture can make things 'cool' (beautiful or ugly) is socially defined, but now in global terms, fighting for visibility in the clutter generated by millions of messages. The interaction between the traditional cultural industries (producing powerful symbolic messages and telling us 'what is cool' or, as Zizek would say, 'what to desire') and creativity is absolutely central. Think about leisure parks or Disneylands: they are a key sector in the new creative economy for the biggest media groups but their content is basically provided by the direct life experience of cultural discourses producing its core value.

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And, also very importantly, if the key economic asset for this new field is the conception of ideas, the main territory for the new creative economy is the protection of these self-same ideas, blurring the limits between cultural copyright and industrial intellectual property. Copyright –not only industrial patents– becomes an essential issue in any

international commerce agreement, as creativity becomes the centre of the new economies.

But what, in fact, is a creative industry? Is it automotive, fashion or tourism? At the base of this conceptual structure there are two main approaches. The US perspective focuses on the emergence of a 'creative class' (as described by Richard Florida) made up of scientists, consultancy and organisational specialists, lawyers and, of course, cultural workers. The European perspective offers a much clearer concept of the creative industries, broadening the traditional 'cultural industries' to embody the new fields of activity generated by technological changes, but not affecting traditional cultural sectors.

Are both the same thing? It is difficult to say, because national plans for cultural and creative industries sometimes point to highly diverse sectors, including tourism, toys, jewellery, musical instruments, software and fashion. And, in some cases, the political departments in charge of cultural and creative industries share the field with areas such as sport and gambling. This shows how the revision of cultural policies from an economic paradigm could evolve to embody highly diverse leisure activities.

Such a miscellaneous approach has made many of us fear the turn in creativity by considering it a techno-fascinating strategy that voids the traditional field of cultural policy, forcing it to make a hard transition to complete liberalisation. In fact, the essential origin of the international expansion of the 'creative economy' concept comes from a liberal turn in cultural policies in the 1990s and in the UK.

The exhaustive deregulation introduced in the UK by Margaret Thatcher after 1979 in many areas of public life redefined the role of Britain's cultural policy, ending the tradition of the 'gradual expansion of the state's role in culture'. The centrality of the economic paradigm during the 80s deepened even further when Labour took it on board in the creation of cultural clusters or cultural quarters, such as the Greater London Council initiative, and later in the replication of Australia's 'Creative Nation' perspective in the 'Create the Future' manifesto (1997). Combined with the nation-branding motto 'Cool Britannia', the creative turn in cultural policy placed the UK at the vanguard of the new international paradigm on creative industries, transforming the perspective of the 'expediency of culture as a resource', positing culture as an instrument with solutions for social, political or economic problems (as explained by George Yúdice).

The creative economy paradigm in cultural policy has both succeeded internationally and received intense criticism, as the creative turn became more decisively 'a self-sustaining, self-referential framework of ideas [that] has developed that has become largely impervious to critique' (as Philip Schlesinger wrote). Still, most of the countries around the world began their own 'creative economy' programmes, changed the name of their respective departments to 'cultural and creative' and stimulated these new activity sectors in the British way.

Let me, then, summarise the 'creative turn' in cultural policies as follows: (a) the consequence of the impact of technological change in many fields of production, and particularly in the diversification of the cultural field itself; (b) the power struggles to define 'cool' and associate it to the products and services of the creative economy exploiting

synergies between cultural and creative sectors; (c) the centrality of copyright, since in many cases creative industries are called 'copyright-related industries'; and (d) the centrality of economic issues, creating the danger of 'culture as a resource' for creating jobs and making the economy grow.

There is, still, a third shift in cultural policies, the most recent and influential of all, because it affects the geopolitics of culture. It is what is usually known as 'soft power'. While culture became a powerful economic sector, while it diversified and filled leisure time in a variety of ways, most countries discovered that the global circulation of culture directly and strongly affected their image. The US reinforced its cultural industries as the key instrument for 'winning hearts and minds' and then, without an explicit cultural policy, gained an immense and positive result in terms of influence by projecting its entertainment to the world, with Disney, Fox and Time Warner obtaining huge economic revenues.

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As the world becomes a more interconnected place, culture becomes not only a national policy asset but a crucial resource for world influence. As a result, cultural policies are now becoming not only the field of national objectives such as promoting identity or stimulating job creation but also a domain of synergies between the national and the foreign level to promote a form of power different to the traditional 'hard' form of armies and economics. 'Soft power', as Joseph Nye calls it, or *rayonnement* using the French term, is essentially a new domain for cultural policies that had traditionally neglected the foreign aspect. The idea of an overcrowded global sphere has made new forms of promotion appear in cities or territories, marketing themselves as products to attract visitors, investments or consumers. Nation branding or city branding are, in fact, some of the most visible manifestations of the 'soft power' turn in cultural policies. Inheriting the logic of traditional cultural policies, soft-power tools include public culture; inheriting the logic of the creative turn, foreign markets are perceived as key areas to expand and develop national structures of cultural and creative production, promoting economic and political goals at the same time.

We are, thus, stepping onto new ground: a communication ground, because national projection is basically an exercise of marketing and communication targeting foreign audiences; but also a cultural ground, because it shapes the traditional fields of cultural policies (and others, of course), now expanded from the national to the foreign level. And it is, finally, a field of foreign policy.

The synergies produced by the 'access and excellence' logic of traditional cultural policies, the 'growth, innovation and diversification' of the creative turn, and the 'influence and soft power' of the foreign dimension of cultural policies are the key to understand the metamorphosis of the cultural field, and should be taken into account by any review of public policies in this context.