CHALLENGING THE CREATIVE CLASS: INNOVATION, 'CREATIVE REGIONS' AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT[1]

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ABSTRACT: Richard Florida's theory of the 'creative class', new regionalism's emphasis on regional networks for innovation, and the business literature on the so-called 'new' or 'networked' economy, all point to the important link between creative thinking and economic success for regions. Out of this intellectual climate have come the current exhortations to rural and regional communities to think 'outside the box' and be 'innovative' and 'creative' in coming up with solutions to their economic, social, and environmental problems. Such advice, generally given from the outside, often carries with it the implication that these communities must change to be more like other places: more diverse, more cosmopolitan, and more entrepreneurial (often implying: more profit-driven).   This paper demonstrates how current theories of regional development encourage harvesting the grassroots creativity of local communities in order to pursue particular kinds of regional development goals. Examples from rural and Indigenous communities in Australia and Latin America demonstrate a distinct pattern of tapping into culture, identity and creative expression to draw market resources into particular communities and regions. While the strategy can be successful to a point, it also overlooks and devalues the deeper roles that creativity can play: helping communities reflect on their experience and define and pursue their own regional development goals, rather than the goals that others set for them.

1. INTRODUCTION

Everyone these days seems to want their region on the map. There are a few proven strategies – though not the ones that might first occur to you. For instance, why not write a song? That approach had worked for the at least one isolated and otherwise invisible region: even here on the other side of the world, people know about West Virginia. "Country Roads," they say, smiling with recognition. "Mountain momma!" Sometimes they sing. John Denver did more for the international marketing of an isolated region than a dozen regional branding initiatives, or fifty regional festivals, or a hundred tourist trails of the sort that now regularly crisscross Australia on the heels of regional developers. The image one artist painted of West Virginia in his music still persists – as do the Yorkshire moors because of the Brontës, or the lure of a coastal Australian lifestyle because of television's *Sea Change*. And then, of course, there is Middle Earth...playing host to ANZRSAI's 2005 "Lord of the Regions" conference.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the arts have started to attract the attention of those interested in regional development. What is interesting from an

academic perspective is the way in which this is happening. How is an increasingly obvious connection between artistic/creative activity and regional development being conceptualised? It appears to be a strongly utilitarian association (in other worlds, based on the *usefulness* of arts and creative activity more broadly for development ends). At least three distinct patterns are emerging:

- Arts/ creative activities as a vehicle for generating increased social cohesion (community building, community development work);
- Arts/creative activities as a vehicle for promoting and marketing towns and regions (indirect economic development strategy); and
- Arts/creativity as a precondition and generator of economic success more broadly (direct economic development strategy).

What is also interesting to observe is how these three utilitarian interpretations of artistic and creative activity tend to become intermingled by those who use them. As with many concepts used in development work, *creativity* has become a 'Double Agent' term – used in different ways by different interest groups, who with such terms, are able to maintain the illusion of common cause. Other Double Agent terms include: *the informal sector* (Peattie 1987), *participation* (White 1996) and *community* (Adams and Hess 2001). The defining characteristic of the Double Agent term is: it works for everybody!

This paper draws attention to some of the various ways that *creativity* is understood and applied in current regional development theory and practice. The paper's goal is to encourage discussion and clear, critical thinking around these many current uses of 'creativity'.

2. REGIONAL SELF HELP AND THE CREATIVE SOLUTION

Regions are geographic places with common physical and cultural characteristics. A region in Australia is generally smaller than a state and larger than a local government area (Dore and Woodhill 1999) but this need not necessarily be the case; even groups of countries can be referred to as a region. Then, there are colloquial uses of the term: in Australia, 'regional' is often used as a gloss for 'non-metropolitan', and regional development is concerned primarily with inequities between city and country. This paper uses *region* broadly to refer to any geographical area with features of common identity. The particular focus is on economically disadvantaged regions, those which most urgently seek *regional development* to improve the livelihoods and lifestyles of their residents.

Both in Australia and overseas, regional development is increasingly characterised by a decentralised, self-help approach (see e.g. Eversole and Martin 2005). Local communities are exhorted to be 'innovative', 'entrepreneurial', and 'creative' in coming up with solutions to their economic, social, and environmental problems. This approach is applied as enthusiastically to volunteer community committees as it is to regional firms, and to impoverished rural women in poor countries as to wealthy organisations in

strong economies. As a result, communities in disadvantaged regions may find themselves working together in a desperate bid to attract outside resources any way they can. They may look to tourism, perhaps, or try to market local products such as handicrafts or foodstuffs. To draw needed resources into their region, they must either find what they have that is unique – or create it.

In the end, a self-help development approach can often lead to the harnessing of local culture, identity, creativity and inspiration for practical regional development ends. Regional communities thus harness the raw materials of art – if not art itself, in the form of painted streetscapes and music festivals, traditional weavings and local stories – as a way to draw market resources into their communities and regions. Regional development theory concurs that harnessing local creativity is a sound strategy: after all, are not the 'learning' regions and the 'creative' regions of the world billed as the regional development success stories? Yet a closer look at the theory and practice of utilitarian creativity reveals some disturbing contradictions.

First, one notes that creative activities are often used by community developers as tools for community building (see e.g. Derrett and Mitchell 2005, Boulet and Dunphy 2005). Yet this 'community building' can mean different things. In some cases, community arts activities simply provide opportunities for local people to come together and express themselves. However, community arts activities and events can also be managed and manipulated, so that local people must express themselves according to particular (perhaps externally imposed) categories and value systems. Thus, local realities may be re-interpreted into a 'health' framework (see e.g. Effective Change and VicHealth 2003) or a 'triple bottom line sustainability' framework (Rogers 2003), among many possibilities. It is certainly not uncommon for the stated aim of community arts activities to be to 'change' the way local people think and act; this was clear, for instance, in a recent evaluation report of a 'community strengthening' theatre workshop in Western Victoria (Southern Grampians & Glenelg Primary Care Partnership 2005). Art may thus become a tool for education (if you agree with the agenda) or indoctrination (if you do not). In any case, these kinds of directed creative activities can easily become a tool for the external manipulation and 'indirect governance' (Rose 1999, Herbert-Cheshire and Higgins 2004) of communities.

Secondly, the literature on cultural industries and creative regions may appear on the surface to give ammunition to those who believe that the arts specifically, and creativity in general, are important to regional development. Certainly, there can be considerable direct economic benefit to regions in cultural industries, such as filmmaking, music, visual art, and so forth (see e.g. Gibson 2003, SGS 2004). There can also be economic benefit to regions from having innovative and creative thinkers driving a region's industries (as per Florida 2002). Yet in affirming the economic development instrumentality of creative thinkers and doers in a region, a number of issues arise. These include implications for equity, for the social and cultural well being of regional communities, and for the question of power: specifically, who is controlling the regional development agenda?

Gibson (2005) observed recently that the economic development agenda of 'the creative industries' has been applied in a way that marginalises social and cultural development objectives. And Rainnie (2005) has specifically and convincingly critiqued Richard Florida's work for promoting an exclusionary development policy agenda – rewarding the existing economic 'winners' (often concentrated in major metropolitan centres), and exacerbating inequities that disadvantage non-metropolitan areas and non-members of the so-called 'creative class'.

Of course, it is possible to speak of creativity without limiting oneself to Florida's focus on an elitist creative class. One can look more broadly at any area's 'cultural capital' (including, but not limited to, cultural industries; see e.g. Morrison 2004). Such cultural capital may be the property of whole communities – it can include their identity, their history and ways-of-doing-things, their creative processes, their local art. It can be 'developed' – following a community development model (see e.g. Derrett and Mitchell 2005). Thus, residents of small towns and invisible regions can use their unique cultural outputs to challenge the ascendancy of urban 'creative classes': affirming that creativity itself is neither by nature elitist or metropolitan in the way that Florida's thesis would suggest.

Yet in the current self-help development climate, there is more to the story than that. As communities are encouraged to take on the challenge of self-help development creatively, they are increasingly tapping into their cultural capital for practical regional development ends. Often this means a close engagement with commercial markets: tourism, handicrafts, and so forth, in order to generate economic returns. What are the implications? Whole communities of people, their identity, their culture, and their creative processes, can become the focus of market-oriented regional development efforts. Art and creativity become, in a word, harnessed – and valued based upon how effectively they work in that harness.

The following sections consider some examples of harnessing culture, identity and creative expression to pursue practical regional development goals. Inevitably, the question emerges: What kind of regional development is being pursued? What is being overlooked? And importantly, what is the role of the arts in creating or challenging different views of progress for regional communities?

3. TRADITIONAL CRAFT AND CULTURE

In many poor countries, artistic handicrafts – often with strong cultural meanings and very expressive – are regularly harnessed as a regional economic development strategy. For instance, June Nash's (1993) collection *Crafts in the World Market* gives many examples of the crafts of indigenous peoples of Central America, with 'techniques and art traditions over a thousand years old' (1993:2), being marketed to generate income. (See also Kaino 1995 on marketing traditional art and craft in the Asian-Pacific region.) Such artisans harness their traditions of artistic expression, while tuning these to market demands – *innovating*, in the language of regional development, in order to

channel economic resources from elsewhere into their economically disadvantaged regions.

Yet this can be problematic in terms of limiting the ability of arts and craft production to support other regional development objectives: such as maintaining cultural vitality, and providing a way to reflect upon changing environments and identities. The need to follow market cues may mean losing the context and meanings of traditional art and craft, as designs become valued for what they can earn rather than what they say. For instance, traditional Mesoamerican designs are now placed on t-shirts and mugs, and characteristic weaving and embroidery styles are adapted to make easily marketable goods such as tote bags and backpacks (see Nash 1993). Market pressures thus push artisans away from expressive creation, toward mass-production. Similarly, Jain (1995) describes craft production in India, where artisans are pressured to respond to the demands of export and urban markets, with their choice of motif and design being determined by market pressures. In the end "What we now call 'handicraft' was once upon a time 'culture'" (Jain 1995:29-30) – once a form of communication, but no longer.

Tapping into cultural traditions of art and craft production to support regional economic development has various implications. On the positive side, for people living in poor regions it offers an accessible income-generating opportunity, using existing skills. It can be an option for people to maintain existing communities and traditional ways of life while securing better livelihoods through links with external markets. Successful examples of using traditional ethnic craft to generate important economic resources for households and regions include the textile enterprises of the Otavalo Indians of Ecuador and of Zapotec communities in Oaxaca, Mexico (Stephen, 1991; Cohen, 1998; Korovkin, 1998). Nevertheless, as Scrase (2003) points out, craft production can be 'precarious' in rapidly changing global markets, and these markets can pressure craft-making toward mass production and even exploitative labour arrangements.

Another positive regional development aspect of traditional art and craft is that they can serve as a form of cross-cultural communication between marginalised groups and the rest of the world, in which the craftsperson-artist communicates his or her way of life and way-of-seeing to outsiders. This can be observed, for instance, in the work of many Indigenous Australian artists. Similarly, Jalq'a and Tarabuco *axsu* textiles from Bolivia, despite their origin as an article of clothing and their frequent appearance in tourist craft shops, are both culturally and individually expressive. The development of a museum-shop in a Bolivian city to display and sell these indigenous textiles has led to a greater public awareness of the area's indigenous heritage and traditions and the expressiveness of this traditional art form – providing a tourism resource for the area, while also helping to improve weavers' livelihoods (Eversole, 1995; Healy, 2000).

Ultimately at issue is the cultural and creative/expressive content of a piece of art or craft, and how that is acknowledged. If artisans can enter wider markets without losing the ability to create their own designs and communicate meanings through them, then are in a potentially strong position. The work retains its

uniqueness and thus its ability (at least in theory) to demand a good price; meanwhile, its creators are able to express key aspects of their personal and cultural identities in ways that demand respect and continue to build up the 'cultural capital' of a region. If, on the other hand, the commercialisation of craft leads to its style and content being driven by outside tastes, the product will become a mere echo of outsiders' expectations (e.g. their ideas of what is 'authentic' and 'exotic' indigenous culture). The craft product may still generate income, but it will lose its ability to communicate. It will no longer be able to reflect or express identities and meanings for the individual or for the group, or contribute as a true cultural driver of regional development.

4. WRITING AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN WEST VIRGINIA

The role of the artist in reflecting and/or recreating identities and meanings can be central to the regional development process. More than simply drawing resources in from outside a disadvantaged region, artists are in a position to affirm and even create new resources from within these regions themselves. This section offers an example from my home region: a rural mountainous region of America. A colleague, familiar with West Virginia from twenty years ago, recently referred to it as a "place of incredible beauty and terrible poverty". Writers, I was told as a child, did not come from West Virginia, but from places like New York that had culture. As a young writer, that was a frustrating message to hear. But things have been changing, and West Virginians have been discovering that they have culture too. Two years before my first book was published by a New York publisher, I discovered that an internationally recognised author lived three streets away from me. She was one of many: many West Virginia writers, writing about their place and its stories, and finally starting to be noticed.

In the past twenty years or so, a small group of dedicated writers and teachers of literature have worked to document the extent of West Virginia writing, within the broader area of Appalachian literature. As West Virginia literary historian Phyllis Wilson Moore has put it, "Yes, we do have writers", and she has worked tirelessly with colleagues to document the state's illustrious writing history – long hidden from state residents themselves. Part of this history had been disguised by history itself – the state of West Virginia was not formed until 1865, and all writers before that date were considered *Virginia* writers. Nevertheless, after 1865, there were still many nationally and internationally known writers with strong connections to West Virginia. That this was never acknowledged until quite recently seems to have been a function of a cultural assumption that it simply could not be. To some extent, state residents' identity was flavoured by outsiders' assumptions about the Appalachian region. In the words of a Tennessee poet (Carson, 1994):

Mountain people/can't read,/can't write,/don't wear shoes,/...,/ and don't talk plain./.../Right?/Well, let me tell you:/ I'm from here,/ I'm not like that,/and I am damned tired of being told that I am.

Perhaps more than any other group in Appalachia, the region's writers have often drawn consciously on Appalachian language, landscape and themes to

validate and communicate their unique identity – and to actively contest outsiders' views of Appalachia.   Many West Virginians have written very 'regionally', using strong dialect and rural settings, giving a strong West Virginia flavour to their work. In many cases these writers seem to be writing their place to contest what others made of it. We are not a place of poverty and ignorance, these writers are saying, we have this identity, this culture, listen (Dressler, 2000):

I am Appalachia. In my veins/Runs fierce mountain pride; the hill-fed streams/ Of passion; and stranger, you don't know me!

There is a peculiar strength in much of this writing that centres itself so strongly in a place and its culture – often as oppositional to places and cultures elsewhere.   As this regional literature has finally entered West Virginia classrooms in recent years, young people no longer believe that writers must be from elsewhere. Not only this, but they are seeing their region through the eyes of writers who portray it as a unique place with a unique culture. This is an important regional development process: one not targeted at drawing outside resources in, but in reflecting, acknowledging, and even re-creating the region's own cultural assets. Affirming and even re-creating a shared identity can be an important regional development resource.   By refusing to be defined and pigeonholed by others, residents of disadvantaged regions assert their own visions of regional development. They thus acknowledge their own internal resources, and override outsiders' visions of who they are, or what they should be.

5. CREATIVE REGIONS? CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The concept of creative regions, like its cousin 'learning regions', is an appealing one.   More than a 'creative class' of urbanised elites of the sort describe by Florida (2003), a *creative region* suggests a setting where everyone's creativity is valued and encouraged. Creativity certainly need not be either urban or elitist. And it arises in many varied cultural contexts. As this is increasingly recognised, creativity and the arts are beginning to be an important part of regional development discourse and practice in non-metropolitan areas of Australia (see e.g. Rogers 2003, Derrett and Mitchell 2005).

But what does the growing interest in creativity and creative regions tell us about the role of creativity in regional development? For community developers, does it imply a process of creative self-discovery for regional communities – or, alternatively, the imposition of external agendas? For economic developers, does it provide the opportunity for local people to define alternative regional development trajectories for themselves, or simply to conform to and serve an existing market? For regional development in general, what is the agenda for a creative region – and is it internally or externally driven?

Creativity is a "Double Agent" development term: it can be used to mean many things and to forward many different agendas. The term "creative region" does not, on its own, tell us whether the message is that creative activities are valuable to regional development because they can "encapsulate response to questions such as…Who am I? Where do I come from? Where am I going?"

(Josephs 2005) or, rather, that for regional development success the problematic conclusion is that "the future lies in selling yourself, your culture, and your region" (Rainnie 2005:9). Yet the distinction is vital. What are the ulterior motives of promoting community art, community culture (Boulet and Dunphy 2005:3) – and regional communities' creativity in general? How are a community's "cultural roots and assets" leveraged to generate export income (SGS 2004), and what are the implications of this for the community's overall *culture* (in the broad sense of their way of life, values, beliefs, social organisation, etc.)?

Artists remind us that the internal resources of a community – culture, identity, creativity – are important. For disadvantaged regions, the arts can play a key role in creating or challenging different views of development. By providing an opportunity for expression, for protest, for telling stories, reflecting aspects of local identity, the arts are in a position to affirm and even create new resources from within disadvantaged regions. Rather than being harnessed for others' purposes, I would like to see the arts – particularly community-based arts – actively involved in setting the regional development agenda.

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