



Resilience, locality and the cultural economy



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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to question the normative interpretations of resilience as they apply to the local cultural economy. The paper has three sections, the first sets out the received notion of resilience that is atomistic and closed (Mode A), and contrasts it with another version (Mode B) which is social and open. The second section reviews some of the important characteristics of the cultural economy and indicates why it is particularly sensitive to local embedding. The third section contrasts resilience informed policy frameworks of Mode A and Mode B. The paper concludes that a form of local capacity building applied to the particularities of the cultural economy, and place, offer a more productive strategy for resilience.

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Introduction

The cultural economy,¹ that which is commonly known as the creative and cultural industries, together with the field of culture, exists in a state of considerable flux. Not only is its internal constitution being renegotiated (the relationship between the for and not-for profit; the formal and informal), it is undergoing a transformation and convergence created by the possibilities of technological changes; moreover its nature of governance is being transformed (what parts are state funded, and for which reasons). Finally, these tensions are played out under various political, cultural, social and economic conditions. Broadly the field of governance of the cultural economy is a contested and complex one.

There has been much debate about national policies, and international initiatives, as well as a contentious debate about the urban cultural economy (Hesmondhalgh & Pratt, 2005; Lange, Kalandides, Stober, & Wellmann, 2009; Oakley, 2004, 2006; Pratt, 2005). Clearly, the scale and context of governance is an important issue. Aware of these limitations this paper seeks to address one aspect of the governance of the cultural economy; that associated with resilience and local cultural policies. The notion of resilience has been a watchword of policy-making debates in the 21st century. Its dominant interpretation comes ready, packaged in an

'austerity' wrapping, one embedded in a rhetoric rooted in the Northern hemisphere and many nation states' response to recent economic conditions. This paper argues that this is but one interpretation, a limited and potentially damaging one to the cultural economy; another interpretation is available which is more suitable, and likely to be more effective, in the case of the cultural economy. The latter interpretation is particularly relevant to the cultural economy as it acknowledges the situated nature of social, economic and cultural action. The term 'local' under-specifies this concern, which is better indicated by the idea of locality (Amin & Thrift, 1992; Pratt, 1991): a unique combination of various networks that construct the 'difference' of places.

The notion of resilience is one that has gained popularity in recent times; it is becoming a hegemonic term, very much like sustainability in the 1990s, or indeed the creative industries in the early 2000s. Like these other terms, resilience has entered into the popular lexicon, especially that of policy making, as a term that appears as relevant and up-to-the-minute. As employees, organisations, and citizens we are urged to be resilient, and regularly to test, and demonstrate, our readiness to be resilient; practically an evocation of an existential state.

The usage of the term has extended from processes to organisations, states and economies and to individuals. The emergent interpretation is a state of being able to withstand external acts that will threaten the integrity of a subject (Bristow, 2010; Christopherson, Michie, & Tyler, 2010; Hudson, 2010; Peck, 2012; Pike, Dawley, & Tomaney, 2010). Such that one is considered negligent if one is not, or not in the act of preparing to be, resilient is failing (Neocleous, 2013). It is easy to imagine how such an

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¹ The usage of the term 'cultural economy' in this paper is indicative of a range of cultural and creative practice, and a conception of 'economy' that concerns commercial, state, formal and informal activities; this usage of economy draws upon a pre-17th century notion: the management of resources.

invocation can become a governance imperative, and a regime. An older interpretation of resilience is readily visible in the form of traditional cultural policy. Resilience here was interpreted as conservation and archiving, investment in excellent training for artists, education for audiences, and both for technicians and conservators. Is it resilience that changed, or the role that the state plays?

This paper re-examines the notion of resilience and highlights that it has at least two trajectories: the most common contemporary usage that tends to an individualist interpretation; an older usage points to a more collective interpretation. Thus, we point to the possibility that the usage of resilience is commonly deployed to legitimate a neo-liberal strategy of shrinking the state. Moreover, we explore the implications for resilience in the cultural economy; here we point to the importance of situated understandings of the operation and activities of particular actions that open resilience to various meanings. The same strategy may play out in different ways both within the cultural economy, and in other sectors of economy and society. This is the conclusion of the paper, namely, that resilience does not mean one thing for the cultural sector, and care and understanding of the sector is needed in unpicking what such a term means, let alone what action it sanctions.

This paper has three sections. The first sets out the received notion of resilience that is atomistic and closed (Mode A), and contrasts it with another version (Mode B) which is social and open. The second section reviews some of the important characteristics of the cultural economy and indicates why it is particularly sensitive to local embedding. The third section contrasts resilience informed policy frameworks of Mode A and Mode B. The paper concludes that a form of local capacity building applied to the particularities of the cultural economy, and place, offer a more productive strategy for resilience.

Resilience: two paths

Resilience in its current usage gains its power from its vagueness of definition and its potential universal and generalised applicability, and the necessity of its application. Clearly, a particular context in which this term has gained further resonance is in the post-2010 recession, and the state imposed austerity packages enforced due to resources being re-directed to bail out failing banks. However, it is also clear, as Klein (2007) and others have noted, that neo-liberals have been keen ‘not to let a good recession go to waste’ and sought to reduce state spending on top of, and beyond, that which might have been deemed necessary to replace monies gambled away by the financial sector that brought the financial system to such a pass. The notion of resilience is open to a number of interpretations from the ability to ‘go-on’ after a threat, shock or damage to the subject; to preparations that pre-empt the possibility of threat; or the ability to quickly recover after that event. These all play into a militaristic scenario that has been common in a post-9/11 world, and one carried on in a post 2010 world.

This first modality of resilience (A) is characterised by the closed approach and has the characteristics of making do with less; to continue functioning with fewer resources. The techniques deployed relate to removing costs from the core unit, a disinvestment, tasks are outsourced and contractual conditions placed upon them to reduce costs and/or risk. Contractual and supply relationships may be minimised to reduce liabilities: just in time supplies and zero-hours employment contracts are common. The social commitments are outsourced and socialised, the costs being shifted to the state or the community: examples are training and welfare. These tactics are a mode of resilience: if the cost bases are reduced, reliance and commitment removed to a bare minimum, or to zero time-scale, the organisation could be seen as case-hardened. This is

a familiar story, and should cause us to question what type of resilience and for whom. Clearly, an apparent resilience for the core company is enforcing precarity on workers and subcontractors. Likewise, socialising risk and training places the burden on others. Moreover, such tactics assume an all-powerful contractor; in different labour market conditions, outsourcing training could be exposing the core to risk.

An alternative interpretation is an open perspective that does not resist but embraces change, and accepts it as part of existence and being. This is closer to a notion of sustainable living; a process of organisation and adaptation to work in harmony with others, the surroundings, and the wider world: one that enables adaptation and thriving. This second modality of resilience (B) is one that takes a system wide, as opposed to an atomistic, perspective. Preservation and sustainability from this logic is about managing resources within limits, but through working with and across boundaries. In contrast to the ‘hard line’ atomistic approach, it is an organic approach that bends to the ebb and flow of resource. Moreover, it is one that has a long term nurturing approach that small investments in the long term can be more resource efficient, although at some moments more (or less) expensive. Resilient here is not about growth and survival at any cost, but changing the nature of the objective and working with resources. Flexibility is the watchword, not inflexibility; openness, and not closed. Mode A perspectives view growth as a norm, and resilience a method to ensure business as usual. Mode B interpretations view growth in both economic and non-economic senses. A more appropriate aim for Mode B might be ‘thriving’ rather than growth.

Both visions of resilience suggest differing logics and modes of problem solving. Mode A seeks to deny the external; preservation is based on the ability to preserve an impermeable boundary. Moreover, in its isolationism, it seeks to insulate itself from context: time, space, and socio-economic-cultural settings. There is a search for the one right solution that will apply in all cases, at all times. Mode B offers a dualistic opposite. We will argue that open interpretations of resilience are more compatible with a thriving culture; moreover, that they are more applicable to the cultural economy. This raises two important points. First, that resilience is relative, from one organisation, group or individual to another; it is an expression of power and control, and one group is forcing the other to bear costs and risks at their expense. Second, that it is contextual; in different market conditions, under divergent macro governance arrangements, the power balance shifts and a different calculation must be made.

In recent years a logic of growth for a few, and immiseration for the many, has been achieved by the absence of social controls and a systemic toleration of injustice has been justified as cost saving, and a necessary act of reduced state expenditure (aside from positive transfers to financial services (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010)). This corresponds to Mode A; Mode B has some similarities to a state governance system wedded to a welfare model. Moreover, mode A is focused by control of outputs and inputs, mode B by management for configuration of process.

The recent economic conditions have been challenging for all sectors of the economy and society, but they have not been experienced in the same way in all places, North-South, East-West, and nationally and locally (Pratt, 2009, 2012; Pratt & Hutton, 2013). The question that this paper seeks to address is how local cultural economies are positioned in this debate, and what types of response will be most appropriate, and for which reasons. Historically, much of the discussion of resilience or otherwise of the cultural economy has been carried out in the context of state funding, where publicly supported culture must inevitably collapse and/or socialise its activities. This is rooted in an economically reductive model concerned with idealised organisations and

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