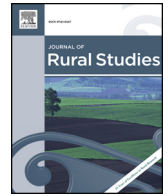


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Artists as workers in the rural; precarious livelihoods, sustaining rural futures

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores rural-based artists' experiences of achieving sustainable livelihoods in rural localities as part of emerging discussions about the significance of culture and the cultural economy for rural development and sustainability. It applies Throsby's (1992) categorization of artists based on their employment conditions: a) 'initial creative artists, i.e. writers, visual artists, craftspeople, composers, and b) performing artists (actors, dancers, musicians)' (p.201–202). Based on semi-structured interviews with artists in Ireland, Wales and Scotland, and drawing on relational understandings of rurality, it examines how livelihood precariousness in the rural is shaped by a) dominant creative economy policy and institutional narratives that promote the rural creative economy as a development opportunity for the rural; b) challenges to artists' professional identities and their efforts to resisting exploitation and devaluation of their creative labour; c) the ways in which local rural communities themselves recognize and support artists' skills and labour as a social, cultural and economic resource that contributes to rural sustainability.

1. Introduction – the new cultural economy

The phenomenon of the new cultural economy – exploiting the commercial potential of culture in an era of globalization and information technology (Garnham, 1987, 1995; Pratt, 2005; Gill and Pratt, 2008; Ross, 2008; Collins and Cunningham, 2017) forms part of the backdrop to contemporary perceptions of art and culture in rural development and sustainability in the developed world. Since the early 1980s there has been sustained political interest in culture's potential to generate innovative forms of economic growth over more traditional arts- and heritage-base policies (Landry, 2000; Florida, 2000, 2002; Hesmondhalgh and Pratt, 2005). The concept has attracted a range of critiques however for the impact of neoliberal policies that have tended to underpin it, complicating understandings of culture where cultural activity is now as much a part of political and economic (i.e. market-based) discourses as aesthetic ones (see also Garnham, 1987). Gibson and Kong (2005) for instance identify the influence of 'normative cultural economy' (549) perspectives – the normalization and generalization of market-led 'brands' (Gibson and Kong, 2005) of cultural economy such as Florida's (2000) 'creative cities'. They argue that these perspectives tend to exclude more critical interpretations of the ways in which culture and creativity (not just in economic but also in non-

productive and non-commodified ways) emerge as more complex components of specific local development, that are less likely to attract policy support. Pointing to an increasingly unclear understanding of what the object of cultural industries policies should be, Pratt (2005) contends that the challenge for public policy in supporting the cultural sector lies in the increasingly 'hybrid nature of cultural production' (31), particularly for cultural policy which spans both the creative industries as largely (but not exclusively) profit-making entities, and the cultural sector that is largely (but also not exclusively) not for profit.

2. The new rural development paradigm

Contemporary discussions on the significance of the arts and culture for rural development are also reflective of a turn in development thinking in the developed world – in this case the new rural development paradigm. This emphasises a holistic approach to revitalizing the rural, not just the agricultural or economic aspects of it (Van der Ploeg et al., 2008). Here, the vision is that rural localities' unique stores of territorial capital should be developed in ways that respect sustainability principles which are applied across interdependent economic, environmental and social spheres (Marsden, 2003; Sonnino et al., 2008). Rural development is therefore understood as a myriad of

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contrasting and potentially competing development trajectories that unfold in specific places (which each have their unique histories, conditions and dynamics) via complex webs of interaction that are multi-actor and multi-scalar. A key aim is to add and retain value for economies and livelihoods at the local level (Marsden, 2003; Sonnino et al., 2008), whilst broadening the local economic activity base. The emphasis is on avoiding highly-regulated, market-based mainstream policies and strategies whose fragmented sectoral approach has tended to constrain actors from engaging directly with locally-based development challenges (Marsden, 2006). Here, actors committed to alternative rural development pathways must construct new 'holistic connections' from within and external to the local (211) that constitute new assemblages of knowledge, information, decision-making structures and development practices that emerge in spatially contingent ways.

3. The place of the arts in rural development and sustainability

The potential of the arts to contribute to rural development under such conditions, and the significance of the rural as a site for cultural and creative work has been a focus for international academic critique for some time, with several key perspectives emerging on the specificity of the rural context in this regard. Representation and commodification of rural culture is one such critique (Halfacree, 2004; Urry, 1995; Van der Ploeg et al., 2008). Here, the rural imagination is cultivated as a form of 'cultural desire' that predominantly reflects the needs of the capitalist market place (Halfacree, 2004; Urry, 1995). The importance of rurality as a source of inspiration (symbolically or functionally) is another aspect in terms of how it feeds into cultural and creative endeavours from an artistic standpoint (Markusen, 2007; Drake, 2003; Bunting and Mitchell, 2001). These dimensions of rurality would seem to hold the promise of specifically rural place-based opportunities for both cultural and rural development (Luckman, 2012). However, Bell and Jayne (2010) maintain for example that forms of policy support for culture have reflected narrowly-defined, urban-centric understandings of culture as a resource for rural sustainability, further delimited by new cultural economy discourses of innovation, entrepreneurship and regeneration; i.e. reflecting little actual understanding of how art and artists operate in and contribute to specific place-based forms of rural sustainability (Anwar McHenry, 2011; Crawshaw and Gkartzios, 2016, 2017; Scott et al., 2016). Gibson and Kong (2005) also highlight the strong urban-centred nature of cultural economy ideas, particularly where achieving their development potential presume upon such conditions as access to city-scale infrastructure, facilities, training, professional associations and other economies of scale. Bunting and Mitchell (2001) contend that the relative absence of these from the rural has also led to dominant association with artists and the urban. They describe the situation of artists' 'economic exigency' (Bunting and Mitchell, 2001, 282) in marginalized rural places, i.e. art being produced out of economic need, whereby the professional status of the artist becomes of secondary relevance to selling art or to including the arts in local economic development strategies.

Artists' relative significance as a distinct group is cited with increasing frequency as part of rural sustainability discourses. Markusen (2007), for example, outlines how artists drive growth in local rural economies via activities generated not just through their own production and sale of art, but also through the establishment of facilities such as artists' centres, artists' workspaces and performing arts facilities. Using consumption base theory, she thus describes artists as catalysts for new and increased local and external expenditure. She refers furthermore to the range of non-economic benefits that artists contribute to their localities as rural residents who take part in and invigorate community life through initiating community arts activities and events (see also Markusen and Schrock, 2006). Duxbury and Campbell (2011) similarly emphasise the capacity of the arts to provide sustainability to rural places and communities experiencing rural restructuring and

change; this occurs through their initiation of new economic activities connected to the production of art, as well as social and cultural activities as part of community-engaged art that enhance local social and cultural capital (Dunphy, 2009; Anwar McHenry, 2011; Luckman, 2012).

The general acceptance of the arts as contributing positively to society and community is not always enhanced by environments or conditions to support artists in their professional or institutional status. Jackson's (2004) national study of US artists establishes an analytical framework along six dimensions that provide more or less supportive places for artists: *Validation* – assigning value to what artists do; *Demands/Markets* – for artists' outputs and commensurate financial compensation; *Material Supports* – access to financial and physical resources including awards, employment, materials; *Training and Professional Development* – conventional and lifelong learning; *Communities/Networks* – inward to other artists, and outward to non-artists; *Information* – data sources about and for artists (45). For each of these categories, Jackson (2004) found that artists struggled to exert agency in having their work validated, to access sufficient resources, or to sustain networks that would articulate their needs at institutional levels. Relyea (2015) also raises concerns about these issues in the era of the cultural economy, particularly artists' own sense of and expectations for themselves arising out of their labour, professional status, social practices and notion of what constitutes the 'public'. Like Jackson (2004) he sees these challenges emerging from the ways that art becomes valued and how its devaluation can be resisted (see also Roberts and Wright, 2004) when ideas on what constitutes art are constantly changing with policy discourses aligned to contemporary cultural economy perspectives. In this regard, Relyea (2015) refers to the increasingly changed focus of the art experience for the artist, away from the object of the art to the artist's subjective position in producing it: '... the independent [artist] goes from being a person with a core, an essence, to being somebody who is performative, who is on-demand and just-in-time, who is in constant feedback with her or his specific context from one moment to the next' (4).

The above insights indicate the potential for art to contribute to rural economic development, but through a more holistic notion of sustainability; one that also has regard to artists' livelihoods which includes acknowledging and sustaining their professional identities and enabling them to achieve a certain quality of life in the rural as part of its development discourses and strategies. Here, certain elements of sustainable rural livelihoods perspectives (used predominantly in developing countries' rural development and poverty reduction research) as developed by authors such as Chambers and Conway (1991), Scoones (1998, 2000), Bebbington (1999) and Ellis (2000) provide a helpful framework to understand how rural development perspectives actually envisage sustainable outcomes at the level of the individual or household. Scoones' (1998) sustainable rural livelihoods analytical framework interprets the success or otherwise of rural livelihoods in relation to the given contexts, resources, strategies, outcomes and institutional processes that mediate them. These are enacted across what Bebbington (1999) identifies as three distinct activity domains: '... instrumental action (making a living), hermeneutic action (making living meaningful) and emancipatory action (challenging the structures under which one makes a living)' (2022), highlighting both the material and social dimensions of livelihood.

This discussion develops two main strands as a framework for critiquing the place of artists in the rural. First, it acknowledges the contested nature of art and its value under varying conditions and circumstances, taking place within the similarly negotiated nature of rural space and place through which the relevance of art becomes manifest. It draws on relational understandings of rurality as a means to examine received notions of artists' livelihoods and contributions to rural development and sustainability. Second, it draws on the concept of precariousness to advance these ideas on the actual contribution of artists to the rural; to explore certain dominant narratives of artists'

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