



The ‘actually existing’ cultural policy and culture-led strategies of rural places and small towns



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ABSTRACT

Questions regarding the relevance of culture-based development strategies are even more relevant to ask when such strategies are applied to rural places and small towns. In urban contexts, the number of citizens and the volume and variety of the cultural sector, other industries and services are important success criteria. In small Norwegian rural municipalities, these factors are even more critical because the Norwegian rural context is characterized by low population density and low variety and volume in industries and services. Rural places and small towns are, to a large extent, neglected in the culture-led development studies, and likewise, culture is largely neglected in rural development studies. A degree of attention is given to the increasing commodification of rural places and the economic sustainability and cultural influence of cultural and creative industries in rural areas but less to the construction of cultural development policies. In this study, the emergence of cultural policy and culture-led strategies in four small rural communities in southern Norway is analyzed in a topological perspective on mobility, scale and the significance of local history and embeddedness. The primary findings are that although policy construction is influenced by the flow of neo-liberal consumer-based cultural policies, it appears that the cultural policies of small rural communities are more embedded in heritage and tradition based on ideas of participation, mobilization and social coherence.

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1. Introduction

Research on culture-led development strategies has primarily examined regeneration of large cities and metropolitan areas, and to a lesser degree rural places and small towns (Bell and Jayne, 2006, 2010; Lorentzen and van Heur, 2012; Miles, 2006). In recent decades, urban development policy has experienced an increased focus on culture-based development in a number of cities around the world. The explanation can be found in different trends, namely culture and cultural industries as alternatives to traditional industry and industrial development (Bianchini, 1993; Hall and Hubbard, 1998; Harvey, 2000), culturalization of the economy as a new cultural economy (Amin and Thrift, 2007; Lash and Urry, 1994; Scott, 2000), and/or increased competition between cities and regions due to globalization (Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Harvey, 2000). These trends are evident in the way that the quality and attractiveness of the city as both a dwelling place and a cultural sphere have gained new meaning in urban development

strategies (Lysgård, 2012, 2013).

Similar changes can be observed in rural development (Almås et al., 2008; Borch and Førde, 2010; Ward and Brown, 2009; Woods, 2005, 2011). While the urban narrative primarily concerns industrial restructuring towards the post-industrial city, the rural narrative is more about restructuring due to a shift in the economy from agriculture and manufacturing to a more service-centered economy (Fløysand and Jakobsen, 2007; Marsden, 1999, 2009), and a shift from a production-oriented culture to a more consumption-based focus on rural living (Lysgård and Cruickshank, 2013). Culture-led strategies has been less focused in rural policy research, although cultural heritage, tourism, cultural industries, and creativity are now evolving as development strategies even in rural areas (Bell and Jayne, 2010).

In an urban context, the numbers of citizens and the volume and variety in the cultural sector and in other industries and services are important success criteria. There is a need to investigate these issues also in a rural context, not in terms of volume and variety but as the relations between places, people and creativity that are characteristic of the rural context (Bell and Jayne, 2010). In small rural communities in Norway these factors are critical because the

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Norwegian rural context is characterized by low population density, low variety and volume in industries and services, an activity-based non-commercial cultural sector with low consumption, and municipalities with small administrative bodies compared to the larger urban municipalities.

According to Bell and Jayne (2010), rural places and small towns are largely neglected in studies of culture-led development. Academic research to date has considered the role of culture in rural development policies mainly by focusing on the role of arts and crafts, cultural festivals, and the meaning of symbolic, cultural, and creative economies to rural development. Part of the literature focuses on the prevailing conditions and impacts of creative or cultural industries in rural areas as an alternative local industrial strategy (Gibson, 2010). The authors question how proximity, remoteness and marginality have an effect on the economic sustainability of creative industries both within and serving rural areas (Conradson and Pawson, 2009; Andersen, 2010; Gibson et al., 2010; Mayes, 2010). Another important body of literature focuses on the increased commodification of rural places and the further discussion on the attractiveness and competitiveness of rural places as entrepreneurial hotspots and tourist destinations (Borch and Førde, 2010; Fløysand and Jakobsen, 2007; Harvey et al., 2012; Markusen, 2007; Markusen and Gadwa, 2010; Therkildsen et al., 2009; Waitt and Gibson, 2013). This research has been important in order to understand the relevance of creative industries and the narrative of the “creative countryside” in contrast to the dominating “creative city” narrative (Bell and Jayne, 2010). However, common to these two research trends has been their main focus on the economic sustainability of creative or cultural production and consumption. Less attention has been given to the broader construction of cultural policies in rural places and small towns, and specifically the cultural policy that encompasses cultural identity, social cohesion, civic participation, learning, and general well-being as well as creative and cultural industries.

For decades and in different ways, Norwegian municipalities have been engaged in culture and cultural politics, either through investments in infrastructure (e.g., museums, libraries, cinemas, and cultural centers) or by providing services for cultural activities (e.g., sports, *kulturskole*,¹ activities for children, artistic performances, choirs, school bands, and festivals). Industrial development based on experiences and local culture (including nature) was not unheard of either prior to the relatively recent introduction of the term cultural industries (Pratt, 2005). Furthermore, this development is not merely an urban phenomenon; for example, only the largest urban municipalities in Norway spend more on culture per capita than the smallest rural municipalities (Storstad, 2010). Measured in volume of cultural amenities and participation in and/or use of cultural activities, the four highest ranking municipalities are rural municipalities or small towns, although the most institutionalized and consumer-based cultural amenities are located in the larger cities (Kleppe and Leikvoll, 2014). In addition, the budgets for cultural purposes are growing faster in rural municipalities than in larger urban municipalities.

There is increasing awareness of the importance of culture and cultural industries in Norwegian rural development strategies.² Several rural places and small towns have adopted elements of culture-led development strategies known from urban contexts, focusing on place marketing and branding, cultural industries, regeneration of former production sites into arenas for

consumption, tourism, festivals, and even spectacular or flagship developments.

Numerous studies have examined the construction of culture-led policies in urban contexts, especially in large cities. However, less is known about the construction of such policies in small towns and rural places (Lorentzen and van Heur, 2012). The questions addressed in the present paper are: How are cultural policy and culture-led development strategies constructed in rural places and small towns? How are culture-led policies mainly constructed in large metropolitan areas adapted for rural places and small towns in Norway—in other words, how well do these ideas travel through time, space and scale? To answer these questions, we need to know more about how cultural policy in rural communities and small towns emerges as a result of a mixture of global policy discourses on the move, local history and tradition, and the present local political context.

The next section (Section 2) presents the main ideas of culture-led development as they have emerged in urban studies. Section 3 elaborates on a theoretical framework for how the intersecting dimensions of mobile policies and local discursive-material construction may be conceptualized through policy mobility, a topological concept of space and time, and a discursive-material perspective on the “actually existing” cultural policies and culture-led strategies “on-the-ground.” In Section 4, I argue that the cultural political economy (CPE) approach has the potential to analyze the emergence of local cultural policies in rural places and small towns. Four cases of Norwegian small towns and rural places are presented in Section 5 and discussed in a discursive-material framework, and in Section 6 the emergence of actual cultural policy is analyzed by focusing on the topology of time and scale, the “actually existing” policy as discursive-material practices, and the power relations forming the policy. In the concluding section (Section 7), with regard to the knowledge generated through the studies of large cities in the culture-led development literature, I argue that while these cities focus heavily on a consumer-based logic of experience spectator and consumer-based culture, small towns and rural places place either more or most emphasis on culture as an arena for participation and mobilization, in which the social and democratic dimensions are at the forefront.

2. The global discourse on culture-led policies

The global discourse on culture-led development observed in the urban studies literature points to three different development strategies (Lysgård, 2012; Mommaas, 2004; Sacco et al., 2014). The first strategy focuses on sociocultural processes and emphasizes the internal processes of a city. The aim is to use culture to revitalize a city's public social life and to create a sense of coherence, pride, and common identity among its citizens (Lysgård, 2012). A typical example is the stimulation of cultural diversity and cultural democracy by opening up cultural arenas of the city and both enabling access for all citizens (Mommaas, 2004) and strengthening social cohesion and participation in urban life (Sacco et al., 2014).

The second strategy aims to foster rapid and substantial growth (city boosterism) by focusing on the attractiveness of a place. Culture is generally emphasized as a medium for attracting tourists, investors, entrepreneurs, and highly trained workforces. Culture should enhance place attractiveness and strengthen the potential for consumption through the provision of different cultural and entertainment offers, social meeting places, cultural festivals, spectacular architecture, and artistic monuments. One way of doing this is through the regeneration of old production sites into post-industrial consumption sites, while another is place branding and marketing (Mommaas, 2004). Sacco et al. (2014) relate these strategies to the creative class perspective (Florida, 2002, 2005) on

¹ Municipal school of music and performing art. Established as a public cultural service in all Norwegian municipalities during the sixties, seventies and eighties.

² Several descriptions and reports from projects in rural places and small towns in Norway can be found via the web portal distriktssenteret.no.

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