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The creative countryside: Policy and practice in the UK rural cultural economy

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A B S T R A C T

This paper explores emerging policymaking and research into rural creative industries, drawing on a case study from the county of Shropshire in the UK. It begins with a critique of existing creative industries policy, which is argued to focus almost exclusively on the urban as the site of creative work. The paper highlights an emerging body of critique of this neglect of the rural in cultural policy, which is matched by a neglect of the cultural in rural policy. Attention then turns to an investigation of the size, scope and characteristics of the creative sector in Shropshire, with findings based on a consultancy report commissioned by public sector actors keen to highlight and promote the county's creative work. This material is used to illustrate some of the distinctive issues facing the UK rural creative sector, which current policy is ill-equipped to address. The paper ends by reflecting these findings back to the broader academic and policy contexts.

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, fostering, celebrating, maintaining, theorizing and measuring 'The Creative City' has been the focus of a large volume of policy and academic publication, conferences and workshops. This agenda has emerged in parallel with urban and regional creative industries development initiatives seeking to achieve post-industrial economic growth and cultural vitality in cities throughout Europe, Australia, Canada, Singapore, the USA, New Zealand, and more recently in Africa, China and Latin America (see for example, Barrowclough and Kozul-Wright, 2008; Cunningham, 2004; Fleming, 1999; Florida, 2002, 2005; Jayne, 2005; Landry, 2000; Uricchio, 2003; Volkering, 2001). The vast majority of this academic research and policy intervention has focused on certain forms of urban activity, labelling these as essential to the working of the creative economy, and as necessary preconditions for fostering creativity (Florida, 2002, 2005; Landry, 2000).

A small number of academic and policy interventions beyond metropolitan centres has nonetheless begun to consider the rural creative economy. In particular, academic research has focused on the role of crafts in rural economic development in the UK (Collins, 2004; Dormer, 1997; Livingston, 2002; McAuley and Fillis, 2005; Paulsen and Staggs, 2005); considered the lives of artists in rural Canada (Bunting and Mitchell, 2001); sought to measure the impact of popular music and rural festivals in Australia (Gibson, 2002; Luckman et al., 2009); and begun to unpack what constitutes the symbolic and cultural economy of rurality in Norway and the UK (Floysand and Jakobsen, 2007; Kneafsey et al., 2001). In a similar vein, policy and consultancy reports in the UK have signalled the importance of arts and crafts to rural competitiveness (Collins, 2004; Crafts Council, 2005; Hunter, 2006; Lister, 2004; Matarasso, 2002, 2004, 2005), and championed the potential of rural creative industries in contributing to local and regional development strategies (Arts Council England). This work has emerged alongside programmes initiated by local authorities and regional development agencies in the UK, which are focused on rural creative industries development strategies.[1]

In this paper we engage with this rural creative industries agenda, which implicitly or explicitly seeks to move away from a seemingly ubiquitous focus on 'buzzy' or 'edgy' urban neighbourhoods. We highlight the imperative for theoretical and methodological understanding as well as policy interventions that are responsive to the particular characteristics of 'the creative countryside'. We begin by reviewing previous engagement with rural creativity and then present findings from empirical research undertaken in Shropshire, a county in mid-west England. While the paper is focused on the UK, we draw on studies undertaken elsewhere to discuss the current and potential policy and academic

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[1] See for example, EEDA, 2001, EMDA, 2000; Invest Northern Ireland, 2002; One North East, 2002; SEEDA, 2002; SWRDA, 2003) as well as www.cornwallenterprises.co.uk and www.creativehereforshire.

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agenda on rural creativity (Bunting and Mitchell, 2001; Cunningham, 2004; Gibson, 2002; Jayne, 2005; Luckman et al., 2009; Volkering, 2001).

In particular, and in the context of calls to consider both the complex nature of the sectors that make up the creative industries (Markusen, 2006) and the 'placing' of the creative economy (Ratinsi et al., 2006), we argue the need to consider 'the countryside' as a place where the creative economy is differently manifested and articulated from the now standard 'creative script' based on cities. In doing so we highlight tensions and issues bound up with recent attempts to overlay 'urban' creative industries development agendas onto longstanding 'rural' policy interventions focused on particular creative sectors (such as crafts or art and antiques). We identify a key tension around ideas about the rural as a site for particular forms of creative work, often embedded in notions of the rural idyll. The paper builds on debates about rural restructuring in order to highlight complex relationships between 'creativity' and 'countryside', and highlights the heterogeneity of and relations between the sectors that make up the rural creative economy (Atterton, 2007; Floysand and Jakobsen, 2007; Hoey, 2005; Woods, 2005). Through reflection on research carried out in Shropshire, UK, we highlight policy and research questions and seek recommendations to enhance interventions into the sector.

2. Beyond the creative city

Urban-based creative industries policy has become a key strategy in addressing the economic (and latterly social) malaises afflicting de-industrialized cities and city spaces, with attention focused on attracting, nurturing and retaining creative practitioners in cities. From Landry's *The Creative City* (2002) to Florida's *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002) and *The Creative Class and the City* (2005), confirmation the role of 'creatives' as saviours of cities has become almost ubiquitous. While Florida's work has attracted growing criticism for its 'identikit' solutions (Chatterton, 2001; Jayne, 2004, 2005; Montgomery, 2005; Nelson, 2005; Oakley, 2004; Peck, 2005), the underlying equation of cities and creativity remains largely uncontested, especially in policy circles. Studies of the industrial behaviour and activities of creative businesses – and policy interventions aimed at nurturing their growth – have tended to follow an urban script, focusing on the characteristics of particular de-industrialized neighbourhoods (cheap rents in industrial ruins, bohemian 'edginess', trendy consumer spaces; see Hutton, 2006) and the types of entrepreneurial and inter-firm behaviour (networking, clustering) either seen to be occurring there or seen to be in need of stimulation (see Barthelt et al., 2004).

The genesis of creative industries policy in the UK ultimately can be traced to New Labour's dissection of the previously broadly (and poorly, in policy terms) defined 'cultural industries' (which included private, public and voluntary sector individuals and businesses, as well as community and other social groups), with private sector activity separated (in New Labour's policy terms) and redefined as the creative industries. As such, creative industries development in the UK (and broadly replicated around the world) is based on a formal definition of 'those industries which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property … [and include] advertising, architecture, the art and antique market, computer software and services, crafts, design, designer fashion, film and video, interactive leisure software, music, the performing arts, publishing, and television and radio' (DCMS, 2001, p. 3).

A key tenet of this policy shift was to view spatial agglomerations of creative industries as a key elements in the movement from Fordism to post-Fordism, and as central to the economic and symbolic competitiveness of national economies and city-regions and their ability to compete in a globalised 'knowledge economy' (Florida, 2002; Scott, 2004). In this formulation, particular cities and particular neighbourhoods in cities have been considered to be the strongest attractors of creative industries, dominated by entrepreneurs ('creatives') whose life is dedicated to a new 'work hard, play hard' ethic of networking and relationship-building (McRobbie, 2002). Only in so-called 'edgy' or 'buzzy' neighbourhoods – places with the right atmosphere or 'feel' that encourages creativity – can creative talent find its inspiration in what Florida calls its 'people climate': creative work is urban work by definition. The creative worker is '*quintessentially urban*. The city … is seen as an indispensable resource and base from which to develop ideas, projects and markets' (Banks et al., 2000, p. 463). The kinds of creative work highlighted as emblematic of the 'new' creative economy – fashion, music, new media and so on – are similarly depicted as essentially urban, as reflecting the environment in which they are imagined and created (Drake, 2003).

In these terms, creative industries production and consumption cultures also have an urban aesthetic, and the iconic spaces of UK creative industries policy and research reflect this assertion: London's Soho or Hoxton, Manchester's Northern Quarter, Nottingham's Lace Market, Sheffield's Cultural Industries Quarter. While initiatives in smaller cities have met with some success – for example in Huddersfield, Stoke-on-Trent or Dundee – the idea that creativity is at home in the city has remained largely unchallenged (see Bell and Jayne, 2006). At a policy level, then, a 'new-found cult of urban creativity' (Peck, 2005, p. 742) has cemented creatives and cities into a powerful policy toolkit that no city manager can ignore.

Yet the economic (and other) crises that affected cities since the late 1970s are not peculiarly urban problems. While they may have been acutely felt in metropolitan centres that had formerly been the powerhouses of industrial capitalism, economic restructuring was also experienced away from large cities. Rural areas have witnessed a parallel downturn in economic fortunes related to the global restructuring of agriculture, leading to a condition some have labelled (not unproblematically) the 'post-productivist countryside' (Wilson, 2001) – a countryside whose economic foundation has shifted, at least in part, from agricultural production, to become a site of consumption, tourism and recreation. While there continues to be debate about the extent and impacts of this rural economic restructuring, there is widespread evidence of shifts in economic activity that are at least partly attempting to offset declines in traditional rural production. Policies of farm diversification, for example, have turned to various alternative economic activities for rural communities, including creative work. Alongside revitalized and rebranded rural food and drink production and consumption cultures (Kneafsey et al., 2008) and growth in the tourism and leisure sectors, a rural creative agenda has been developing in the UK in the form of a countryside lobby in arts policy, and an overlapping arts lobby in rural policy. However, recent initiatives have sought to explicitly translate 'urban' creative industry development templates into rural areas.

For example, in 2006, a Rural Cultural Summit was convened to formulate a cultural strategy for rural England, and various policy and position papers have circulated, all advocating a shift in focus towards rural creativity (see Lister and NRTF, 2004: http://www.e-mailout.org). Lister makes the case for 'rural proofing' cultural policies and for 'culture proofing' rural policies, arguing that forms of creative practice in the countryside have been overlooked, and that rural policy neglects the contribution of the arts to economic and social regeneration in rural areas. Indeed, the arts are generally seen as only contributing to 'soft' agendas such as community cohesion and maintaining a sense of tradition and heritage, but are not imagined as analogous saviours of the post-productivist