

[This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *The International Journal of Cultural Policy* on 14 June 2021, available online:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10286632.2021.1933460>]

The Hidden Roots of the Creative Economy: A Critical History of the Concept along the Twentieth Century

Abstract

This article delineates a critical history of the economic imaginary of the creative economy. Applying the Cultural Political Economy analytical framework, the article looks at the turning points during the twentieth and twenty-first century in which different but connected discourses over creativity in the economic sphere emerged. Multiple contributions derive from the results. First, the research adds analytical depth to the existing literature, recovering the thought of Patten and the economic and political debate about creativity during the fifties and the sixties. This operation allows the integration of these discourses and more recent ones about the creative city, creative industries, and creative class under a common framework. Overall, a clear pattern emerges, consisting of two phases: a first phase of germination, in which academic and intellectual circles conceptualise the discourses, and a second phase of dissemination, in which political figures appropriate and spread those discourses. Lastly, we argue that the discourses composing the creative economy imaginary, taken together, can be interpreted as the attempt of Western economies to trigger a new successful cycle of economic accumulation, able to replace the Fordist one currently going through a crisis.

Keywords: creative economy; cultural political economy; economic imaginary; creative industries; creative class

Introduction

‘When Richard Florida, John Howkins, and others introduced the concept of the “creative economy”, bringing it to a mass audience, they did not know what kind of monster they had created’ (Koivunen and Rehn 2009:7).

This comment - made in the opening of an edited book on creative economy in 2009 - can still be considered nowadays as a dominant opinion. There is an extremely prolific literature on the topics of creative economy and creative industries, but it usually dates back to Richard Florida in the first case and to the first Blair government in the second. After all, Florida himself in the ‘Rise of the Creative Class’ stated that the creative economy concept had been coined just two years before his book, in 2000, by an article on *BusinessWeek* (Florida 2002:30). Nevertheless, even though the works of Florida and others were critical for the dissemination of the creative economy concept, it would be a severe misconception to credit them as its creators. The idea of a ‘creative economy’ was conceptualized for the first time not in 2000 but in 1912, and

lived through a complex history throughout the twentieth century. Academic, economic, and political actors advanced economic discourses revolving around creativity and presented them as transformative, despite framing the scope of that transformation in different ways. Turning the spotlight on the history of these discourses, their evolution, and their connections can critically advance the understanding of the function and meaning of the highly successful economic imaginary (Sum and Jessop 2013) of the creative economy in contemporary society.

The article analyses the historical uses of economic discourses based on creativity, focusing in particular on four discourses – ‘creative society’, ‘creative cities’, ‘creative industries’, and ‘creative class’ – and on previous seminal theorizations by some pioneering authors, following a Cultural Political Economy approach (Jessop and Oosterlynck 2008; Sum and Jessop 2013). Based on the results, it argues that these discourses, albeit partially independent, can be identified as part of a connected broader lineage and a common economic imaginary, rather than being unique and disconnected discoveries. This broader lineage is the repeated introduction of creativity to the economic realm as an attempted panacea to cure the multiple crises and illnesses of modern capitalism - in terms of both the conditions for economic development and growth, and the conditions and experience of work – countering the fear and signals of decline of American, and by consequence Western, economic hegemony. The article also highlights a double-phase common pattern of germination and dissemination of these discourses, in which intellectual circles bear responsibility for the coinage and theorisation of the discourses but it is political figures who adopt and disseminate them in society. A second relevant outcome is the creation of a more solid bridge between two concepts: creative industries and the creative economy. Indeed, even though they have gained tremendous popularity and a vast literature has been devoted to each of them (so large, in fact, that it is impossible to summarize in a single article), a curious lack of dialogue or comparison can be observed between the two research streams, despite their common use of creativity as the keystone upon which they build their meaning.

Studying the Creative Economy as an economic imaginary

The analytical approach we will apply is based on the ‘cultural turn’ in critical political economy (Jessop and Oosterlynck 2008; Sum and Jessop 2013). Cultural Political Economy states that ‘through variation, selection,

and retention, economic ideas may have a performative, constitutive force in shaping economic forms and relations' and that therefore we need to distinguish between a 'real economy' constituted by the total amount of economic activities and the 'economic imaginaries' as the formalization of the whole of these activities in a narrative coherent complex which gives meaning to the economic field (Jessop 2009). The formation and development of an economic imaginary must of course be seen in the context of a complex relation between semiotic and extra-semiotic processes, considering structural, agential, and technological factors in addition to the discursive ones (Sum and Jessop 2013). Furthermore, economic imaginaries tend to arise and develop during times of crises (Jessop and Oosterlynk 2008, p. 1159): when a cycle of capitalistic accumulation begins to decline, it is not only its productive system that struggle, but its associated discursive apparatus struggles, too.

The article is structured according to this analytical framework, adapting it to the diachronic nature of the research. It will analyse the creative economy as an economic imaginary, characterised by common semiotic and extra-semiotic aspects. However, rather than being a unique and coherent unit, we argue that the creative economy can be better analysed as a plexus of different sub-imaginaries, spanning over time along the twentieth and the twenty-first century. For the sake of clarity, we name these sub-imaginaries as discourses. The four aforementioned discourses have been selected by performing a review of the existing academic and specialistic literature, searching for theorisations or debates applying the notion of creativity to the economic sphere, selecting only the cases in which the concept was adopted by political actors, becoming resonant in society outside merely academic or intellectual circles. Other theorisations that did not directly generate an economic discourse but were germinal for the development of the imaginary are described as its pioneers in the first paragraph.

The pioneering theorists of 'creativity' in economics

Presenting the cultural history of creativity in art, literature, and philosophy, Nelson (2010) observed that creativity is a rather recent word - first appeared in 1875 - and that what should be highlighted is its 'condition of possibility', a particular arrangement of knowledge deployed in many contradictory ways in present times.

To study this arrangement of knowledge in the economic field, we first need to mention Schumpeter's thought, especially the image of 'The perennial gale of Creative Destruction' (Schumpeter 1942). With it, Schumpeter referred to the capacity of innovation to create a new economic cycle by launching its expansive phase, making previous innovations obsolete. This concept had an enormous influence on all subsequent discourses over creativity, enjoying widespread recognition in the fifties (Strassmann 1959) as well as in studies describing the 'startup economy' of Silicon Valley (Baron and Hannan 2003; Davila et al. 2014; Gans, Hsu, and Stern 2002; Henton and Held 2013; Marcy 2015).

In fact, much can be said about the use of creativity in economics based on Schumpeter's observations. Creativity was still characterized as an evocative rather than a technical term, used to capture intuitively the way in which the capitalist system triggers new cycles of economic accumulation. Moreover, the Schumpeterian figure of the entrepreneur is presented as the brilliant individual that triggers new cycles of creative destruction thanks to his personal qualities. This fits very well into the idea of the contemporary creative entrepreneur, promising the emergence of new economic growth thanks to the genius of 'creative' entrepreneurs. Of course, these are oversimplifications of Schumpeter's concepts, but they still represent powerful suggestions.

The first explicit theorizing of a 'Creative Economy', however, was laid down in the second decade of the Twentieth century by the economist Simon Nelson Patten in 'The Reconstruction of Economic Theory' (Patten 1912). Patten was an eminent American economist at the turn of the century, professor of Economics at Wharton Business School and President of the American Economic Association in 1908. Unfortunately, time has been harsh on him, relegating his figure to obscurity in contemporary academic and public debates, apart from rare exceptions (Fox 1967) that underlined his prominence as the first economist to theorize the passage from an economy based on the paradigm of scarcity to an economy of abundance.

Its contemporary anonymity, however, does not prevent his theories from being relevant for the development of the social and economic thought during the twentieth century, in an indirect way. Patten influenced the thought of contemporary and semi-contemporary thinkers that have better survived the roughness of time as Thorstein Veblen, John Hobson, and John Maynard Keynes, and more generally the

institutionalist school of thought (LaJeunesse 2010), but above all, he significantly influenced the American society at the beginning of the century and the national policies during the New Deal (Horowitz 1980).

In his most famous book, 'The new Basis of Civilization', for which he is credited as the pioneer in economics of abundance studies, Patten theorizes two kinds of economic stages in the evolution of societies: a 'Pain economy' (or Deficit Economy) and a 'Pleasure Economy' (or Surplus Economy) (Patten 1907:9). The first characterizes all pre-industrial societies, the second is the stage reached by the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century. He describes the U.S. as a country that is quickly becoming globally hegemonic and that is showing the first conspicuous signs of a mass-consumption society (Patten 1907:14–25). In a pleasure economy, people will be driven by the pleasure derived from the consumption of goods produced by society, and Patten appears as one of the first economists and intellectuals to attach great importance and positive meaning to the fulfilment of people's desires, passions, and emotions. He strongly argued that 'Sentiment and thought should not be antagonistic, nor should sentiment be crushed by the growth of logic and science' (Patten 1912:93) and that society needs to outline a goal able to 'evoke emotional machinery to carry men [sic] toward the ends they seek' (Patten 1912:94).

The structure in two stages was later corrected by the author in the aforementioned book 'The Reconstruction of Economic Theory' - one of his latest publications in 1912 - in which he added:

To love pleasure is a higher manifestation of life than to fear pain; but the pleasure of action is in advance of the pleasure of consumption. Action creates what pleasure uses up. This would divide progress into three stages: a pain economy, a pleasure economy, and a creative economy. Each stage has its own mode of thought, and its own social institutions.

(Patten, 1912, pp.92)

The mode of thought and specific social institutions of the 'creative economy' age, Patten states, will be characterized by the loss of relevance of class membership and the centrality of the individual and the self (Patten, 1912, pp.94).

Despite the concept being just sketched and apparently the result of speculative reasoning, the progression in three stages here expressed by Patten is very interesting considering the time in which it was written: even resisting the temptation to over-interpret him, his work offers considerable insight in that not only he identified a forthcoming stage in which people are led by the pleasure of goods produced, outlining the fundamental aspects of American Fordist society (the Ford T started to be mass-produced just four years before the publication of the book), but he also foresaw that the subsequent stage would have been characterized by a transition of the source of pleasure from the consumption of goods to their production, defining such labor as 'creative', thus forming a 'creative economy' with a corresponding rise in relevance of individuality and culture at the expense of class membership.

The fame of Patten's thought is incomparably inferior to Schumpeter's one, and it is difficult to assess his influence accurately. His theory of 'creative economy' is nonetheless significant because it shows how some concepts, which are very similar to the discourses currently dominating the creative economic imaginary, are no recent invention: they had already been made explicit and formalized in the U.S. at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Another author must be briefly mentioned as one of the pioneers of the creative economy imaginary: the philosopher John Macmurray, who developed the concept of 'creative society' in his work titled 'Creative Society: A Study of the Relation of Christianity to Communism' (Macmurray 1936). The book is a philosophical speculation conducted under a rigorous application of the Hegelian dialectics on the relations between Christianity and communism, arguing that Marxism can and should be applied to Christianity to correct some of its idealistic weaknesses and enable the construction of a truly community-oriented society, defined as creative because it will allow individuals to work voluntarily and creatively and free themselves from moral and cultural constrictions.

Macmurray's book could simply be dismissed as a spurious semantic coincidence, considering the strictly philosophical nature of its speculation, its main themes (Christianity and communism), and the scarce resemblance of this 'Creative Society' with contemporary discourses. However, an odd but incontrovertible bond links Macmurray, a philosopher quite neglected by the academic debate, to Tony Blair, a key figure for

the development of the discourse of 'Creative Industries'. Not only did Tony Blair write the Preface to a selection Macmurray's writings from 1996 (Macmurray 1996), but he also remarked on many occasions the influence of Macmurray on his thought, for example when he told an audience: 'If you want really to understand what I'm all about, you have to take a look at a guy called John Macmurray [...] he was influential – very influential. Not in the details, but in the general concept' (Rentoul 1996:42–44). Macmurray shaped Tony Blair's ideas of community and society (Hale, Leggett, and Martell 2010:96–102): these two elements were key concepts for Blair's New Labour politics, but also represented the foundations of a creative society for Macmurray.

The John the Baptist of Creative Economy: the 'Creative Society' imaginary after WWII

'Creativity has become vogue. [...] As is usually the case when an idea becomes fashionable, the notion of creativity has attracted the frivolous and repulsed the serious'. This observation, which could sound as if written in the last decade, was the opening of an article published on Harvard Business Review in 1956 by William J. J. Gordon (1956:41). We will now reconstruct the debate over creativity in economics, its birth in the fifties and dissemination in the sixties, specifically focusing on the first discourse about creativity and economy to become resonant: the one of 'creative society', now generally forgotten. This development is even more striking if we consider who was responsible for its resonance: it was Ronald Reagan who popularized the idea of a 'Creative Society', making it his campaign slogan in California, where he became governor in 1966.

Although Reagan himself stated in a public speech few months after being elected that he 'became a kind of Johnny-One-Note on the subject of government of, and by, the people of building what I called a Creative Society' (Ronald Reagan Presidential Library 1967), he never defined his idea precisely. The paradox of a slogan so central but at the same time so vague can be retrieved in one of the first books on Reagan - published in 1968 - consisting of a collection of his recent speeches and talks. The book is entitled 'The Creative Society' (Reagan 1968), recognizing the absolute centrality of this concept for his ascent to political success as Governor, but except for some passages in the Inaugural message as Governor, no other speech is devoted to this idea. This seems to confirm creativity as an evocative soundbite that permeates everything

he talks about, rather than a specific and well-developed concept. An imaginary, not a program of intervention. What most resembles a definition is probably a sentence in the Inaugural Address, in which Reagan states the following:

Government has a legitimate role, a most important role in taking the lead in mobilizing the full and voluntary resources of the people. In California, we call this partnership between the people and government The Creative Society. [...] The Creative Society is not a retreat into the past. It is taking the dream that gave birth to this nation, and updating it, and making it practical for the 20th century. It is a good dream. It is a dream that is worthy of your generation. (Reagan, 1968, p.9)

We know the details about the origin of Reagan's slogan, but its influences are more nebulous. Reagan attributed the hint for the slogan to William Steuart McBirnie, a controversial right-wing and fervid anti-communist preacher, but contextually specified that 'The political philosophy behind the slogan 'has been expressed by me for the last 15 years' (Reeves 2010:281–82). In a public speech during the campaign he proposed 'Creative Society' as a constructive alternative to the 'Great Society', the program and slogan by President Johnson (Reagan 1966).

Steuart McBirnie was neither an economist nor an intellectual, and Ronald Reagan was no political philosopher. Therefore, in order to understand who inspired the Creative Economy and how it could become the backbone of the political doctrine of the governor of California and future U.S. President, we should probably take a step back and observe the debate about economics in the United States during the fifties.

One decisive inspiration can be traced down to two articles written for the Harvard Business Review by Abram T. Collier, a lawyer and chairperson in the insurance sector. The two articles, namely 'Business Leadership and a Creative Society' (Collier 1953) and 'Faith in a Creative Society' (Collier 1957), are - as far as it is known by the author - the first cases in which the 'Creative Society' soundbite is used in the U.S. for economic discussions.

Abram T. Collier was no academic himself, but had ties to a group of scholars that on HBR during the fifties dealt with the topic of renewing the American dream and American economic power, starting from the assumption that 'American Capitalism is somehow in the position of classical Rome - at the apex of its glory: and only one direction remains for it to go – down' (Levitt 1956:38), and that this direction could only be reversed by a 'more creative capitalism' (Levitt 1956:42). Collier made a similar remark, albeit more focused on the decline of the semiotic performance of the traditional vocabulary associated with American capitalism, in his opening of 'Business Leadership and a Creative Society' in 1953:

The general experience is that the terms 'capitalism', 'competition', 'American way of life', 'land of opportunity', and 'free private enterprise', through excessive repetition, abuse, or otherwise, have lost much of their capacity to convey the meaning intended. (Collier, 1953, p.30)

According to Collier, the underlying reason was that capitalism had neglected the desires of people, their aspiration to creativeness due to their nature of both creator and creature (Collier 1957:37), generating the paradox of an age of unprecedented wealth accompanied by low levels of joy and satisfaction.

He extended his critique to the realm of pure economics as well: only a creative and cooperative society, as opposed to a competitive and acquisitive one, could provide development and growth without widening the gap between rich and poor (Collier 1953:35). Therefore, businesspeople had the duty to articulate a new ideology, i.e., a creative society:

Accordingly, I put forward this simple proposition: that our society is a creative society; that its prime objective, as well as its great genius, is its creativeness [...] Specifically in American business is now beginning to be recognized that everyone has the capacity for the satisfaction that comes from creative accomplishment. (Collier, 1953, p.30)

For Collier, it must be noted, America is already a creative society. The duty of the ideology is not to transform society but rather to bring to the surface the already existing, submerged 'creative society'.

As already mentioned, Collier is the only one that explicitly attempts to theorize a 'creative society' ideology, but the broader topic of creativity is addressed also by many other authors on HBR, signalling a more general interest (Gordon 1956; Randall 1955), and they all similarly depict creativity as an asset possessed by everyone. Others express very similar concepts without explicitly mentioning creativity, such as Peter Drucker, who in 1951 wrote that it takes very little training for the added experience and skills that make a person capable of doing a variety of jobs productively, and such training certainly develop a better, more satisfied, and more productive worker all-around (Drucker 1951:77).

We analysed HBR articles as the place where creative society was conceptualized by Collier and generally as reference point for the American discourse on economics during the fifties, but many other references could be found outside of it, for example a working paper for Rand Corporation analysing creative thinking as a branch of the problem-solving theory and its specific characteristics (Allen, Shaw, and Simon 1958). Another remarkable fact is that in 1964 Gary Becker published 'the Human Capital' (Becker, 1964). A cornerstone of the Chicago School of economics thought, the concept of human capital became pivotal in the promotion of entrepreneurship (Marvel et al., 2016) as the field of self-expression in contemporary capitalism (Feher, 2009), an essential component of future discourses about the creative economy.

It is unknown whether McBirnie or Reagan took direct inspiration from the works of Collier, but a connection - with some degrees of variation between the two versions of the imaginary – is identifiable: in both, we perceive the same necessity to find an expedient capable to trigger a new wave of economic expansion for a country at its apex of development, but lagging, too. They share the same basic idea that every individual has inner creativeness which needs to be released (for Collier through the businessperson, for Reagan through politics), as well as the belief that flourishing creativeness in the economic sphere will lead to higher standards of happiness and well-being. The main difference is the element that must be corrected to realize the Creative Society: for Collier it is capitalism without human and religious morals, for Reagan it is instead the pervasive government that oppresses people with taxation and bureaucracy. It is hardly a coincidence, thus, that 'Business Leadership and a Creative Society' by Collier was re-published as HBR Classic in the first issue of 1968, one year after Reagan's election as governor of California.

We analysed creative society as the 'John the Baptist' of the creative economy imaginary. Like the preacher from the Christian tradition anticipated and announced the arrival of a greater messiah, the creative society discourse preceded and laid the foundations for the subsequent, more prominent discourses to come. Nonetheless, this discourse would remain isolated until the new millennium, when other different discourses related to the same creative imaginary started to spread. This void is characterized by an apparent contradiction: the decline of discourses about creativity seems to correspond to the rise of phenomena that were their subject matter. The seventies are the decade when the Californian Silicon Valley became a model of economic success based on innovative and creative firms connected with large flows of venture capital (Kenney and Florida 2000). In the same decade, the Fordist system of production and the related cycle of capitalist accumulation entered into permanent crisis (Amin 1994; Arrighi 2010) and a new mode of production started to emerge, Toyotism, that emphasized inter alia the need to develop the creative potential of every worker removing the separation between manual and intellectual work (Dohse, Jurgens, and Malsch 1985). Meanwhile, an American 'knowledge economy' started to be theorized (Drucker 1969). In the eighties, Reaganomics in the U.S. and Thatcherism in the U.K. de facto realized the political program of 'creative society' dismantling and privatizing welfare state, cutting off taxes and promoting the individualization of society and private enterprise in the economy (Jessop et al. 1988).

To sort out this paradox, we should look to the nature of the creative imaginary. The evocative rather than accurate nature of creativity is mainly used to frame political visions, economic ideologies, or metaphors to translate technical and academic concepts into more understandable ideas. This favours the use of 'creativity' in times where the impulse to change is felt both as urgent and as undefined. When the processes are occurring and become observable more in detail, other, more accurate terms seem to be used to refer to specific phenomena.

Creative Industries for a Creative Class: the turning point

'The Creative City' (Landry and Bianchini 1995) is a brief open access book (sixty pages) that is relevant as it is the only publication about creative economy that precedes both the millennium turn and the election of Tony Blair as U.K. Prime Minister. The ties with New Labour are strong: the book was published by Demos

and Comedia. Demos is a think-tank founded in 1993 by Martin Jacques and Geoff Mulgan, respectively former editor and contributor of *Marxism Today* (Thorpe 2010); Mulgan was its first director and then notoriously became the Director of Government's Strategy Unit and head of policy for Tony Blair. Comedia was a publishing company and consulting firm founded by Charles Landry in 1979 and collaborating with Geoff Mulgan himself, Franco Bianchini, Ken Worpole, and others. Besides publishing works on the cultural and creative industries, creative cities, and economy, Comedia provided consultancy on urban development for English, European, or Commonwealth cities, but interestingly never for American ones.

'The Creative City' was a publication internal to the Comedia network, with an explicit partial promotional aim. Landry defined The Creative City as an aspirational concept, 'a clarion call to encourage open-mindedness and imagination' (Landry 2005). Two main concepts appeared in the Preface and in the first chapter: first, cities are in a structural crisis (Landry and Bianchini 1995:7); second, creativity has always been the lifeblood of cities and now it is just a matter of using this natural asset to turn them into successful creative cities (Landry and Bianchini 1995:11–12). The following chapters gave a definition of creativity, listing a toolkit of strategies for policy-makers to shape a creative city and citing some concrete successful examples of revitalization processes, many under the consultancy of Comedia itself. The re-published and extended book by Landry alone in 2000 displayed the subtitle 'a toolkit for Urban innovators' showing it did not differ much from the original publication, albeit in a more extended and detailed form (Landry 2000).

Landry and Bianchini's book focuses on the discourse of Creative City, but the idea of Creative Industries lies right underneath. It was already at the centre of a previous publication by Comedia - albeit in its previous formulation of Cultural Industries - authored by Mulgan and Worpole (1986), 'Saturday night or Sunday morning?', a set of suggestions to the Labour Party for a new program concerning the cultural and art industries. Cultural industries were popularised in its current meaning in the English debate by Garnham, in the 1983 pamphlet "The concepts of culture", published by the Greater London Council (Garnham, 1987) as part of its efforts to promote the local economy. More in general, during the eighties many British local councils - largely dominated by Labour - invested on policies to develop creativity and cultural industries at city level. They pursued this agenda to counter Thatcherism and to solve the economic problems brought by

the crisis of Fordism and the consequent loss of jobs in the manufacturing sector (Frith, 2005). The birth of the creative industries' concept from the concept of cultural industries, even though some differences can be traced (Cunningham 2002), has been analysed as mainly due to semiotic differences (Garnham 2005). A vagueness in the boundaries between the two 'Industries' persists, to the point that it is customary to refer to them together through the formula of CCIs, i.e. Cultural and Creative Industries (Casey & O'Brien, 2020). Notably, even the first academic contemporary conceptualization of 'Creative Economy' by Howkins (2001) - yet another British author - is based on the idea of Creative Industries, defined as the totality of Creative Industries taken together (Howkins 2001:21).

Another example of the tight link between the concept of creative city and of creative industries is the UNESCO Creative Cities Network, also the probably most distinctive example of dissemination of the creative city concept. The network, established in 2004, aims to connect the cities that 'have identified creativity as a strategic factor for sustainable urban development' (Creative Cities Network, n.d.). In its vision, creativity is a key asset to counter major challenges of contemporary cities, as 'the economic crisis, environmental impacts, demographic growth and social tensions'. Furthermore, cities are particularly apt to develop creativity because it is at local level that 'culture and creativity are lived and practised on a daily basis', and cities belonging to the network are divided in categories according to the creative industry in which they excel. Notably, these statements bear remarkable similarities with the conceptualisation operated by Landry and Bianchini.

Nevertheless, if we want to analyse the trigger that caused the 'Creative Industries' discourse to become a trending soundbite outside a circle of intellectuals and gurus, we must again shift our focus to the political sphere, like in the sixties: as is widely known, Tony Blair's first government popularized the discourse of 'Creative Industries', under the decisive influence of the aforementioned networks, especially with the establishment of the Creative Industries Task Force. In its first publication in 1998, the Task Force concisely defined the creative industries as follows:

Those activities 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.

(Department for Culture Media and Sports (DCMS) 1998)

This definition can hardly be considered satisfactory: apart from the element of intellectual property, its boundaries are made loose and undefined by the intrinsic vagueness of the concepts of creativity, skill, and talent. The Creative Industries are characterized from the beginning as a discourse (Fairclough 2000) tailored by New Labour Governments into a doctrine, to be used as an ideology (Schlesinger 2007) during the re-branding of the U.K. as 'Creative Britain' and 'Cool Britannia' (Hewison 2014), rather than a precise definition and set of policies. This rebranding followed a general turn toward creativity as a fundamental tool for post-industrial economic restructuring (Banks and O'Connor 2017).

The discourse is rooted in the efforts of the Labour party to counter the political hegemony of Thatcherism during the eighties (Schlesinger 2009) by proposing a convincing promise of renewed economic growth, which was nevertheless also partially influenced by Thatcherism (Garnham 2005). Once again, creativity was used to build a vague but evocative economic discourse, that in this case promised to counter the progressive decline of Britain (McGuigan 1998). Labour's policies were consequently tailored on this imaginary, and as noted by Banks and Hesmondhalgh (2009) this entailed a general reluctance to acknowledge all labour market analyses disproving the utopian presentation of creative labour, as well as a tendency to dismiss structural problems of labour markets as problems of individual origin or design, treatable only within a narrowly defined education and training agenda.

The discourse on creative industries is deeply rooted in the British (and Commonwealth) context, scarcely interacting with debates in other contexts. As a striking example, when in 2000 U.S. author Richard Caves (2000) published the first book entirely devoted to creative industries, he made absolutely no reference to the widely discussed British debate: he even declared that his aim was to fill a vast existing gap in the literature, noting the absence of extended analyses on the functioning of creative industries, defined as the artistic and cultural economic sectors.

Despite the popularity of Creative Industries discourses, 'The Rise of the Creative Class' (Florida 2002) is surely the most influential single book for the development of a creative economy imaginary and a best-seller. It generated vigorous debate and attracted harsh criticism (Peck 2005; Pratt 2010) and alternative

formulations (Scott 2006). It also constituted the first of a series of follow-up books that reinforced and promoted the core theory and operative method enunciated in the first (Florida 2005, 2006, 2010).

Even if the title of the book is devoted to the new discourse of the 'Creative Class', discourses over creative cities and the creative economy are the pillars on which Florida's imaginary takes shape. The book opens with a visionary and powerful declaration: we are entering a creative age. Florida illustrates the reason for the superiority of his 'Creative Economy' definition over the concurring discourses of Knowledge or Informational Economy (Florida 2002:6), as creativity is the source of competitive advantage. In order to become the foundation of a 'Creative Age', creativity must be something more than a source of economic advantage: society, our very lives, have 'begun to resonate with a creative ethos', where an ethos is defined as the 'fundamental spirit or character of a culture' (Florida 2002:15). The keystone of Florida's book and the reason for its success is that creativity, despite its vagueness, can be operationalized into an Index - the 'Creativity Index' - determined by an array of clear-cut numerical variables. The conclusive chapter advances a statement that is presented as innovative but can actually be considered a leitmotiv in all the analysed discourses about creativity: 'Every Single Human Being is Creative' (Florida 2002:383).

In Florida's narrative, there is no past, no ancestors on these topics and discourses: his genealogy goes up at most until two years before. Only Howkins' book is mentioned as a relevant publication named after the same concept. Caves' book is instead the only reference on the topic of creative industries, otherwise entirely neglected. The British academical and political debate is almost completely ignored.

Nevertheless, a comparison between the two streams of research can provide insightful results. First, they have in common a remarkable promotional origin, accompanying the academic analysis with consulting services. Comedia consultations on creative cities were provided only to European or Commonwealth cities but never crossed the Atlantic Ocean toward American cities: this left space for the expansion of a similar service in the U.S.

With his 'Creative Class Group' consulting company, Florida went even further: he did not limit himself to counselling. The conception of the Creativity Index, sustained by the intriguing framework of the 'Three Ts'

(Technology, Talent and Tolerance) is the wizardry transforming a vague and elusive idea, creativity, in a number mathematically derived from a combination of numerical factors. The evocative semiotic power of creativity is bridled to the computational realm of scientific methods: it is now possible to assign to every city a value representing its creativity, i.e. its success in the approaching creative age, classify all cities in a ranking, and offer consultancies to cities that want to gain a better placement by improving specific factors of the Index. On the other side of the Atlantic, the British discourse on Creative Industries had been translated through a combined work between policy-makers, firms, and research bodies in a concrete set of policies, investment and research programs led by institutions like NESTA, that survived to the New Labour itself (Oakley et al., 2014).

Another interesting common element between the two research streams is the implicit standpoint from which their framework takes shape: the idea that the structural crisis of the present times can be overcome mainly with development at urban and regional level, and that the challenge of becoming a successful creative city (or a successful nation composed by creative cities with developed creative industries, in the case of New Labour doctrine) is a global competition, whose winners are those able to exploit internal factors and accumulate competitive advantage over the other contestants. To summarize, both research streams take the endogenous growth theory as an implicit economic standpoint: in fact, endogenous growth theory has been assessed as a fundamental influence for New Labour doctrine (Garnham 2005:26) and Paul Romer, one of its most illustrious theorists (Romer 1990), is one of the very few economic references made by Florida in his book.

Ultimately, the last question remains to be cleared to connect the American-based creative class/economy discourse with the previously analysed ones: Florida's research path before becoming the guru of creative economy. To answer this question, we should look at his partnership with Martin Kenney: together, according to Google Scholar, they co-authored 56 academic publications, almost all preceding 'the Rise of The Creative Class'. Their main subject of analysis was the crisis and failures of the American system of mass-production and the consequent decline of American economic hegemony, threatened by Japanese companies (Florida and Kenney 1990b; Kenney and Florida 1993). Another prolific research branch they

explored was the role of Venture Capital in technological innovation and regional development, in particular regarding Silicon Valley (Florida and Kenney 1988). Surprisingly, Florida and Kenney authored one of the harshest criticisms to startups' creative economy (Florida and Kenney 1990a), in which Silicon Valley is described as an 'Hobbesian World' saturated of 'me-too copycat start-ups' leading to industrial fragmentation and inability to generate technological innovation, destined to succumb to Japanese enterprises.

Florida's previous research path enables us to read his discourses related to the creative class and creative economy, albeit contradictorily, in a context of reflection upon the transformation of the American economy from mass production to a post-Fordist model. Creativity emerges once again as the tool which triggers a new cycle of economic growth in a society otherwise considered on the verge of economic downfall.

Variations, selection, and retention in Creative Economy discourses

Four discourses about creativity have been isolated in our analysis: creative cities, class, industries, and society. We analysed the theories of creativity in the economic field during the first half of the twentieth century and their legacies, then we focused on the two periods in which discourses about creativity emerged in the public debate. Some significant elements can now be discussed from an overall assessment of the results.

The idea of creativity as highest human aspiration and the vision of a creative age in which people would find gratification from their own labour is not a recent conceptualization but is attested already in the American society long before the public emergence of creative economy discourses, as demonstrated by Patten's reflections between the nineteenth and twentieth century and MacMurray's book from the thirties. These elements, together with the influential Schumpeterian writings cited above, constituted the semiotic foundations of the future imaginary of the Creative Economy.

Compared to the pioneers' thought, some interesting innovations appeared in the discourse about Creative Society: the idea of creativity as a tool not only to guarantee renewed economic growth, but also a higher standard of happiness, and its conceptualization as an untapped asset that every human being

possesses and only requires proper stimulation to manifest. The latter idea will become a cornerstone of the creative economy imaginary, constantly repeated in all following discourses. This characterization has two main symbolic implications: firstly, every individual can feel directly involved in the discourse and part of a movement that is improving society; secondly, if creativity is a latent quality that every individual/city/society possesses by nature, that makes it an overflowing asset for potentially every society.

Reagan adopted the discourse of Creative Society with one main variation: the enemy became the pervasiveness of the state, that oppresses individuals with its bureaucracy, preventing them from releasing their potential creativity. The creative society would reduce welfare state and state intervention limiting itself to the promotion of one's inner creativity. This vision, advocated for California, has direct links with Reaganomics, Thatcherism, and, more generally, neoliberalism.

A two-phase structure is clearly observable, in this and in the following wave of creative economy imaginary: the first phase is germination, where discourses are conceptualized in intellectual or specialized circles, while the second phase is dissemination, where discourses are used and popularized by politicians.

We defined the discourse over Creative Society as the John the Baptist of Creative Economy. Despite its minor relevance and diffusion, this discourse has been the trailblazer of future imaginaries, and relabelled many of the elements of the creative society discourse. The conditions are the same, but re-contextualized: creativity is the answer to the decline of the U.K. and U.S. on the global scene. It is an evocative concept, although still vague (an 'aspirational concept'), a natural, untapped asset possessed by every city and individual, the lifeblood from ancient times, requiring only the right policies to be brought to the surface.

The discourse about the creative cities and industries follows the same structure in two phases: it was the prerogative of politics, i.e. the New Labour and UNESCO, to make the imaginary hegemonic in the U.K. public sphere (and policy programs) and at an international level.

The Creative Class discourse presents all the main elements of the Creative City and Creative Industries discourses (although with almost no references to the British developments), the main variations being the idea that creativity can be operationalized, that it is measured according to the intensity of an array of factors,

and that the studies focused on local rather than national developments. Furthermore, Richard Florida's conceptualisation - if read together with the other previous discourses - reveals another assumption of the creative economy imaginary: its claim of 'newness', reiterated at the birth of every new discourse.

We summarized the results in Table I, dividing each discourse into the two different phases of germination and dissemination.

****Insert Table I here****

From an overall analysis of the variations and historical developments of the creative economy discourses, some further elements of interest can be added. First, creativity became a central element of the rhetoric of economic doctrines pertaining to both sides of the political spectrum: Reaganomics (and Thatcherism) on one side, and New Labour on the other side. Albeit differently framed and employed to support different policy agendas, the pervasiveness of creativity, combined with the persistence of some aforementioned commonalities, is a further indicator of its paradigmatic status in post-Fordist economics. Second, even though it remained in the background for most of the article, the idea of creative entrepreneurship emerges from our analysis as the fundamental link that allowed to connect creativity as a human feature with the economic field. The Schumpeterian conceptualisation laid the basis for this connection, while the development of entrepreneurship as a tool for self-expression reinforced it from the seventies onwards. From this point of view, the discourse about the creative class represents the explicit recognition of this fact, the ultimate focus on the individual (entrepreneur) as the source of creativity.

Conclusions

This article represents a first attempt to delineate a critical history of the creative economy. We analysed the birth and development of it as an imaginary that many political and economic actors have proposed as transformative, although the scope of that transformation has been framed in quite different ways. Our aim has been to rescue considerations over the creative economy from a sort of wilful amnesia, by exhuming the long-running discussions from the 1950s and the repeated use of creativity as a panacea for the multiple ills of modern capitalism.

Empirically, the results suggest a great level of coherence between discourses on creativity. This coherence is not limited to the conceptualization of creativity but ranges from the mechanisms of dissemination to the purposes for which it has been used. This is valid both for discourses neglected by academic debate, i.e., the contribution by Patten and the discourse on creative society, and for discourses highly debated in research streams, although scarcely interacting, like creative industries and creative class. By demonstrating the commonalities between the different discourses and delineating them as characteristics ascribable to one overall economic imaginary of the creative economy spanning across the last century, we argue that it would be useful to rediscover Patten's thought as well as the whole debate of the fifties and sixties in the U.S. and to consider the concepts of creative industries and creative class/economy as autonomous, but connected parts of the same historical process and general imaginary.

Indeed, an intimate bond can be observed between the rise of discourses depicting a creative economy and the decline of Fordist economy: in this regard, the history of creative economy is primarily the history of the research of an asset on which to build a new, equally effective cycle of capitalist accumulation in post-Fordist Western societies after the demise of Fordism - which, not coincidentally, started in the U.S. and in the U.K. There is perhaps a bridge to be built between the literature about the creative economy and the literature dealing with the decline of American Fordist hegemony and the struggle to find a new equally successful and attractive paradigm (Amin 1994; Arrighi 2007, 2010).

Lastly, we observed that the concept of 'creative economy' has always been loosely and evocatively defined, moving from the optimistic and convenient assumption that creativeness is an asset naturally possessed by every single individual, city, or industry. In this sense, it has been politicians' and businesspeople's vocabulary rather than intellectuals', who coined the concept but used it mostly to indicate a vision of the future, often in a promotional way. The creative economy has been depicted as a sort of philosopher's stone, adopted for its promise to transform an inherent quality of people into profits and growth.

Acknowledgments

Declaration of interest statement

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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