

Kate Oakley
Mark Banks *Editors*

Cultural Industries and the Environmental Crisis

New Approaches for Policy



Springer

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Chapter 1

Cultural Industries and Environmental Crisis: An Introduction



Kate Oakley and Mark Banks

1.1 Introduction

Culture and the arts—where they are considered at all in environmental debates—are generally viewed as either benign low carbon activities that bring pleasure and meaning, or as irrelevant in the face of existential crisis. As cultural industry scholars, we reject both these readings and instead argue for a critical consideration of the role and potential of cultural activities in the face of mounting crises, environmental and otherwise. At the very least, cultural industries are part of the way we make sense of things and sense making is as vital as ever, but in addition they are huge commercial entities, instruments of public policy across the globe, and, in some cases, major polluters and resource consumers.

This edited collection will explore these issues—at the nexus of cultural and environmental concerns—from a variety of angles. Its origins are in a five-year interdisciplinary research project, the Centre for Understanding Sustainable Prosperity (CUSP), based in the UK but drawing on an international network of scholars. CUSP's concern is how we might live well and even flourish on planet of resource constraints and amidst mounting social problems. The project has explored this concern in various ways, including through studies of sustainable finance, 'good work' and the moral underpinnings of environmentalism. One of us (Oakley) has led a team examining the role of arts and culture in advancing what CUSP Director Tim Jackson (2016) calls 'sustainable prosperity'. In this, we have explored ways in which arts and cultural activities can help develop ideas of the 'good life' beyond

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unsustainable material consumption and researched the complex interactions between cultural prosperity, place and the quality (and availability) of employment and leisure. Throughout the project we have tried to argue that only by addressing deep-rooted social problems—inequality in particular—can we hope to survive the environmental crisis and that only by holding on to a vision of a better future can such an enormous effort be mobilized. This normative project is very much at the heart of this edited collection as well.

This introductory chapter provides some context for the book and looks in particular at the orthodox discourse of the ‘creative economy’ and the role it has played in establishing what we argue is an unsustainable model of cultural industries production and consumption. The final section of the introduction will look in more detail at the individual chapters and some of the shared themes they intimate or suggest. In keeping with the overall CUSP project (and our own intellectual ambitions) we strive also to explore some avenues for hope, identifying instances where environmental (and wider ecological) crisis might provide opportunities as well as threats, and where cultural producers are helping to progressively address the urgent dilemmas and challenges now being raised by ecological change under advanced capitalism.

1.2 Entwined Crises

We are well into the second decade of a global financial crisis and what was initially dismissed as a short-term ‘credit crunch’, and then a temporary ‘downturn’, now seems more like a terminal stasis or decline, sometimes referred to as ‘secular stagnation’ (Jackson 2018). GDP per capita and labour productivity across the richest nations have been declining for decades and the Global North look set for a period of sustained low growth rates, just at a time when mounting social problems require large-scale public spending and investment. However, governments and mainstream economists appear unwilling to accept the need for any reappraisal of dominant ideas, even as nations continue to suffer the effects of multiple and repeating economic crises that appear increasingly damaging, yet also immovable (Jacobs and Mazzucato 2016).

Together, and relatedly, the durability of some ingrained and seemingly unchallengeable inequalities has precipitated social crisis. While overall rates of growth might plateau or decline, the very richest minority has become more adept at securing a disproportionate share of the available wealth, so entrenching poverty, low wages, and a reduction of welfare supports for the poorer majority (Piketty 2014). Material deprivations, coupled with some skillful political manipulation of public anxieties, has fueled the rise of right and far right governments in a number of countries, and raised wider concerns about the stability of social democracy and any future provision of social systems that might at least aspire to provide all citizens with shared opportunity and a collective well-being.

Furthermore, the last years of the 2010s saw a huge increase in media reporting of some of the environmental problems being occasioned by a capitalist-fuelled climate crisis, propelled in part by mounting number of environmental disasters themselves—Australian bushfires, Indonesian floods at time of writing—but also by growing, media-savvy resistance in the form of the school strikes led by Greta Thunberg. This volume is not concerned with media representation of the climate crisis *per se*. Rather, the point here is that while the climate crisis is, and has been, intensifying for some time, *public awareness* of the crisis is probably at an all-time high. The sense of crisis is a pervasive one and is reflected increasingly in the texts and commentaries of media and cultural producers, as well as in the aesthetic politics of emerging organizations like Extinction Rebellion. Yet, at the same, time the mainstream media are also accused of exacerbating crisis, through the pervasive reduction of environmental disasters to banal ‘images of devastation’ that encourage a ‘distanced voyeurism’ (Demos 2018) which displaces discussions of responsibility, and complicity, and the significant political steps that will be necessary to reverse the accelerating pace of destruction.

It therefore seems a perfect time for the cultural industries to be thinking not only about what to say about these entwined crises, but also about developing different and sustainable models of *sourcing, organizing, producing and distributing* their cultural content in order to help challenge or alleviate crisis. For us, this assumes a need to prioritize ways of making cultural goods that don’t rest on assumptions of unchecked accumulation or economic growth, nor the unlimited extraction or exploitation of physical and human resources, but seek instead to challenge these conventional understandings, norms and practices. But this is generally not happening. While there are now an encouraging number of ‘socially-just’, ‘inclusive’, ‘ecological’ ‘transitional’, ‘decolonized’ and ‘post-growth’ approaches to cultural industries production, these still remain fairly small-scale, marginal and disintegrated. At the same time, the pursuit of ‘business as usual’ has produced a situation where the cultural and media industries are now major polluters, and where digital technologies have overtaken aerospace in the production of greenhouse gases and video streaming services are the emissions equivalent of Spain.

In capitalist economies there is nothing new about cultural production being at the forefront of new technology use, nor about their promotion of an idea of growth and expansion. But alongside that, the belief in the arts and culture as source of resistance or alternatives remains resilient, and while the counter culture of the 1960s may have collapsed into Silicon Valley tech-dystopias, plenty of artists, writers and musicians work continually to ensure that the sense of culture as a space of progressive possibility is not entirely extinguished, and that their own work is able to draw attention to the damages and dangers of unchecked capitalist cultural production. In parallel, within academia, environmental concerns, particularly about energy use, the extractive intensity of new digital technologies, and electronic waste (Gabrys 2011; Maxwell and Miller 2012) have become more prominent and the complicity of the cultural industries with unsustainable models of economic growth is now being questioned. We are witnessing the rise of new approaches that seek to challenge the idea of economic growth as a desirable social objective, drawing on

recently revived notions of ‘degrowth’ (for example, see Kallis 2018) or otherwise prioritizing cultural economies that foreground commitments to overall human well-being rather than GDP and accumulation (Banks 2018; Oakley et al. 2018). And so while critics of the cultural industries might once have had relatively little to say about such matters, recent years have seen a new critical consciousness emerge that has sought to engage with the social, environmental and ecological limits of creative, media and cultural industry growth (Caraway 2017; Maxwell and Miller 2017; Oakley and Ward 2018). This is taking on a particular urgency and resonance, not least because governments and creative economy policy-makers ceaselessly tend to promote creative and cultural industries as the best guarantee of ensuring the much desired return to an unshackled (and therefore unsustainable) pre-crisis economy (for example, see Bazalgette 2017; DDCMS 2017).

1.3 Cultural Industries and Creative Economy

While, for most commentators, global capitalism remains in the throes of crisis, this is far from detectable in orthodox policy discourse on the cultural or creative sectors. Just in the UK alone, the current UK Industrial Strategy, the Creative Industries Sector Deal, national Governmental research programmes, the Creative Industries Federation, and the British Council abroad, remain committed to talking-up the creative economy, routinely identifying it as the ‘fastest growing sector’ and at the forefront of (a much anticipated, but never quite arriving) national economic recovery. Much the same views can be found in other national policy contexts (for example, see BMWi 2017; Canada Heritage 2017; France Créative 2013) and transnational bodies such as UNESCO and UNCTAD (2018) and the EU (2018) continue to promote culture and creativity as commercial panaceas.

While even in the most stagnant national economies the creative economy is reported as booming, we need to be sceptical about this growth, and what it might ultimately mean. Notwithstanding some of the more general and established concerns about the utility of GDP (and GVA) as measures of growth, and the specific difficulties of measuring an industrial sector mainly comprised of (many unregistered and hard to measure) small- and micro-enterprises, it is something of a moot point that the creative economy might currently be growing when the wider economy on which its success depends remains in deep sclerosis. Further, any reported creative economy growth has tended to be quite concentrated, both geographically and sectorally, mostly benefitting ‘core’ cities, and occurring in mainstream IT and software sectors that might not even be regarded as ‘creative’ or ‘cultural’ in any conventional sense (see Banks, Chap. 2). Growth has been further propped-up by reduced investment in education and training, low wages, heightened inequalities, and the exploitation of (increasingly) limited natural resources and environmental assets. These trends do not suggest an especially robust, stable or ‘sustainable’ basis for future expansion—not least because of the very real possibility of an intensification of limits on the carrying capacities of the economy, society and environment.

While many policy-makers have chosen to ignore these uncomfortable truths, it is of course the case that some mainstream ecological approaches (such as ‘sustainable development’, ‘inclusive growth’, ‘green growth’ and so on) have been identified as potentially adaptable to the creative economy (Florida 2017; OECD 2012; RSA 2017). Yet while such approaches might advocate a ‘responsible’ economic growth, they do so within an established capitalist economic framework, ‘despite overwhelming evidence of its unsustainability and the inequalities inherent in it’ (Kothari 2018, p. 251). Such approaches fail to countenance that we might have reached a critical juncture where the old model seems increasingly untenable:

... we cannot *have* growth much longer: ecological constraints in terms of resources scarcity and a sinking global absorption capacity increasingly reduce the margin of profitability on investments. Industrialised countries may have reached a threshold at which the feasible growth rates no longer secure employment, social mobility and welfare (...) The enforced creation of additional economic value at the same time creates disvalues as a counterpart—for example more social inequality, isolation and new dependencies’ (Rosa 2018, p. 7).

Thus, while we agree the creative economy has an important role to play in global economic futures, we need to challenge the uncritical acceptance of its more banal and upbeat projections. Not only does creative economy discourse have a tendency to (over) promote the creative economy as an unproblematic solution to systemic economic crisis, it also romanticizes the social affordances of creative, digital and AI technology, glosses over social and workplace inequalities, and pays only lip service to ideas of environmental ‘sustainability’. Indeed, it tends to be short-term *economic* sustainability that is prioritized over concerns for, say, equal opportunity, fair pay or environmental care. Such is the nature of economic policy, one might reasonably argue, yet to cling doggedly to the idea that the cultural and creative industries will help accelerate *return* to a pre-crash world of unlimited expansion and growth, is to deny the realities of a more complex and unsettling present, one where a reprise of the kinds of carbon-fuelled growth witnessed in the twentieth century is no longer a realistic option. Even on its own economic terms, the creative economy fails to account for some of the very real economic, social and environmental *limits* now being posed to a model based on compound growth, and the unfettered exploitation and extraction of people and planetary resources.

By the terms of its own rhetoric and publicity, the creative economy imagines itself as both cutting-edge and forward-thinking. It projects itself as a dynamic means to future prosperity, based mainly on rebooting a capitalist model of market- and technology-led expansion inherited from the past. But in the midst of an unfolding set of economic, social and environmental emergencies, how sustainable is such a model? And what alternatives might there be to effect change? The chapters in this book seek to address these, and similar, questions.

1.4 The Chapters

Each of the chapters is self-contained, and offers its own distinct argument or case study designed to address the theme of cultural industries and environmental crisis. There are, inevitably, some shared concerns that feature prominently: environmental extraction and resource consumption, waste and pollution, labour and social justice, expropriation, place and gentrification for example, but many of our authors are also dealing with a number of these issues simultaneously. Our intention was to invite different insights from a range of cross- and inter-disciplinary perspectives, drawn from a range of national contexts. The chapters variously showcase expertise drawn from cultural and media studies, cultural policy, human and urban geography, music, sociology, and work and organization studies, and from case research undertaken in the UK and wider Europe, North and South America, as well as research with a more integrative and global inflection. While each chapter stands alone, it also speaks to a paramount concern—about the possible futures for culture and cultural industries production in a period of accelerating and uncertain environmental (and wider ecological) change.

We begin with **Mark Banks'** chapter which continues the theme of this introduction with a critique of current approaches to cultural production in the creative economy and an analysis of the ways in which policy and governments are failing to address existing and incipient crisis. More importantly, he introduces the idea of 'creative de-growth' as one way of thinking through future economic scenarios for the cultural industries. As in the CUSP project, this looks to a future when cultural resources are decoupled from ideas of capitalist economic growth. As Banks argues, however desirable this might be, the notion of the arts as a potential series of *denials* or *limitations* is something that is fraught with difficulty, given the heritage of the Enlightenment and the lingering impacts of Romanticism that pervade cultural production in the Global North.

Rick Maxwell's chapter, alongside those of Brennan and Caraway, looks at the current and historical practices of some specific forms of cultural industry production. Its starting point is a case study of Eastman Kodak, a US company whose failure, in Maxwell's words, was 'rooted in its contempt for the ecosystems it inhabited'. This frames the subsequent discussion about environmental accounting and reporting, and outlines the risks that companies face if they fail to incorporate green accounting practices. As Maxwell has it, the social liabilities highlighted by green accounting have been largely ignored in the creative economy sector, due in part to the sector's delusion that it is inherently clean and environmentally benign.

Matt Brennan is both an academic and a musician, and his chapter draws on a recent research project entitled 'New Directions in Music and Sustainability Research'. It looks at environmental sustainability as it relates to both live and recorded music, and then focuses particularly on musical instruments, in this case the drum kit, as a case study of a cultural object with an environmental, social and cultural 'footprint.' The chapter alludes also to a crucial wider issue—on what terms

might we seek to continue to enjoy pleasurable and meaningful forms of cultural production in an era of profound environmental challenge and change?

Based on her work in Argentina, **Paula Serafini's** chapter picks up some of the ideas of resource 'extractivism' and exploitation raised by Maxwell. The intensive and extensive extraction of natural resources for export, a model that both characterized and plagued many Latin American economies, is considered by Serafini in the case of the cultural industries, where the impact of a creative economy model has been associated with gentrification and the withering of support for local and indigenous cultures. The idea of 'resilience' is flagged as important here and she concludes by looking at proposals for alternative models of cultural production that might provide for a more genuine sustainability in the face of an extraction crisis.

Brett Caraway writes about Amazon, one of the world's largest media companies and largest consumers of energy. This chapter seeks to re-establish the material connections between 'online' companies and the physical world by considering the broad ecological impacts of Amazon's business practices. Looking at shareholder reports and other evidence, Caraway pays particular attention to Amazon's logistics system and its considerable ecological implications. One of his arguments is that any gains in environmental efficiency through e-commerce must surpass the overall increase in throughput associated with the expanded sale of Amazon-supplied goods and services. Yet, for Caraway, Amazon's sustainability initiatives currently not only 'fall far short of reversing the entropic dissipation of resources', they are liable to 'dramatically increase the rates of material throughput' by encouraging and enabling processes of accelerated and unfettered consumption.

Cecilia Dinardi's chapter also looks at Latin America and continues some of the themes raised by Serafini. It examines the extent to which the informal creative economy—which is often located in peripheral urban neighbourhoods and slums—can often provide a genuine alternative to mainstream or purely commercially-led cultural and creative industries. Using examples in Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires, she looks at how public support for informal economic projects in arts, culture and crafts may generate both social and cultural (as well as economic) benefits. As she argues, engaging with—rather than denying the existence of—hidden and informal economies of culture and creativity offers a good starting point for public policy to develop more inclusive programmes for the sector, aimed at those traditionally excluded from the economic mainstream. But she cautions that, while policy remains underpinned by a market-oriented logic based on individualistic entrepreneurialism and commercialization, any gains are likely to be precarious.

Continuing the theme of urban cultural production, **Mariangela Lavanga** and **Martina Drosner** draw on their research in the city of Amsterdam. Like Dinardi and Serafini they are interested in the motivations and politics of cultural workers and how these might offer a counterweight to a mainstream market logic. By taking the case of De Ceudel—a planned workplace for creative and social enterprises—the chapter looks at the aspirations and contradictions of enterprises that claim to put sustainability and the 'circular economy' at the heart of their emerging business models.