



## Against the Fetishising of Creativity

Creativity Conference, Prague, March 2009

Creativity is a beloved *non-word*, an almost messianic formulation; one of those public screens onto which everyone can project almost everything. It is a term coined to offer hope and positive expectation; a catchword to employers and a must in job application letters. Invoking it is *de rigueur* for 'alternative minds' rebelling against bourgeois 'virtues'. And now it has also become an essential part of the EU-speak of the Lisbon Agenda.

This is unsurprising. Creativity's semantic aura suffuses philosophy, contemporary economics and democracy itself.

Philosophically, creativity connects human beings with the Creator, the gods or God, distinguishing us from the animals. We do not merely repeat patterns, we consciously *create*, reflectively questioning fundamentals and projecting hope.

Creativity has assumed a democratic meaning too, as a good that should be accessed by all. No longer is it seen as a privilege of decadent flaneurs, of the grandsons of mercantile families à la Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*, of artists and other 'special' humans; rather, it is virtually a basic social-democratic value, a societal right. More recently, it has been invoked in arguments for integrating difference in our societies: diversity pays off....

Contemporary 'creativity' is also regarded as a remedy for the traditional economy's so-called downturn. It is the post-industrial mantra in a field where competition needs and produces new rules for the global game. This began in the 60s with European fears that the Japanese would highjack 'our' ideas and simply copy 'our' technology: invention was reserved for 'the West'. Such Eurocentric beliefs have been challenged as never before, but now they are being reinvented. The 'Western' paradigm of the Cold War has crumbled a bit. Still, in terms of global competition (with the new 'tigers', 'threshold states' and, of course, China), this paradigm still functions as a 'Western we', despite bitter European-US battles (in the film industry, for example).

Rational and irrational motives intermingle. Market-and-competition apologists are beginning to argue for protectionist, 'national' solutions, spreading fear of the East. Societies profiting from the hungry new creative powers now depict their benefactors – the purchasers of their machines and know-how, and producers of cheap goods – as a threat.

'Creativity' has moved up the terminological career-ladder, becoming *the* criteria for success (if not survival) in the global economy: 'We will lose out in manufacturing and production; we only have a chance if we are faster and slimmer, cleverer and better educated, more creative, more innovative than others.'

Paradoxically, creativity is again being characterised in theological terms, albeit inversely. Since the Renaissance, humankind has elevated itself to the status of omnipotent creator; but this process seems to be ending with the threat of *disempowerment*, a *memento mori*. Creativity is being pushed as almost the only *key to survival*. Those who lose the competition on creativity may ultimately disappear. 'God' (long since declared dead) not only gives life, but also takes it away.

Europe particularly exploits 'creativity' in its narrative; as the 'old continent', it has to. 'We' don't want to look old, and 'we' don't want to become the museum of the world, visited by the millions of creative Chinese on their holidays.

Creative industries are the carrots in this campaign. They figure as the forerunners of the big new story of growth and competitiveness based on the virtue of 'brain aesthetics' rather than more traditional skills. They allegedly show the way in creating added value (and profit) out of (almost) nothing. Their songs and games are the backdrop to the new theological turn of competition. The names of their (often American) heroes and products even sound light-footed and leisurely. Richard Florida, for one. Consequently you *have to believe* in order to make the story work. (It is not for nothing that financial figures on creative industries are ominously vague.)

### **Creativity as the new fetish**

*Has* creativity become the new fetish? The European Year of Creativity and Innovation encapsulates new hopes for competitiveness; not, clearly, the competitiveness of 'befriended others' on the globe, but 'ours'. This is a signal to Europeans: 'We' may be able to say 'Yes we can' as well. Not quite as ringingly as Joyce's Molly Bloom ('Yes, I said, yes, I will, Yes'); more 'Yes, we *may*, if we *can*.'

European politicians and officials seem to have placed a good deal of trust in the magical sources of creativity: they decided not to attribute any budget to the EU Year of Creativity and Innovation. It would work without one, out of the abundance of good ideas and hunger for implementation. And indeed: if creativity is what we expect – the magic formula for the survival of the fittest today – how could we pay for it? It is either there, for free, or not; and nobody could buy it, anyway.

Enough irony: it's too serious a matter. Despite the fact that we don't know much about the secrets of creativity, we probably all agree that it is better to have it than not to have it, clearly as an individual, maybe also as a society.

However helplessly we contradict ourselves in describing creativity (unexpected combinations; connections between different energies and different modes of working; non-linear intelligence; artistic views; sensitivity; acceptance of chaos and unpredictability; sources in obsessions and neuroses), creativity isn't content as yet, nor does it automatically produce 'good' content. It can mean (and produce) almost anything. You can be very creative for evil ends – and man has been devilishly creative....

We don't know if creativity is nurtured by equality and security or by poverty and fear. Doesn't hate make certain people creative? Does poverty suffocate creativity or oppression spark it into life? Otherness and the encounter of difference do seem to inspire creativity, yet being excluded as the 'other' can render one mute.

Admittedly, there are many suggestions regarding the conditions most favourable to creativity – e.g. the three t's of (again) Richard Florida: talent, technology and tolerance. Many of these suggestions are all too obvious.

Can crisis be good for creativity? If so, then perhaps we are blessed in this Year of Creativity and Innovation – and of the Ox.

### **Creative Europe in the world**

These sceptical thoughts are not meant to be iconoclastic. Rather, I am pointing out some of the contradictions apparent in the discussion of creativity, in the hope that fetishism will not win out over rationality.

Firstly, I think that the current discourse is a highly competitive one which is essentially about defending a rather privileged position (that of 'the West'). Losing the 'battle' would mean huge

economic and social problems for Europe. However, the socio-economic and political experiences of the past ought to alert us to the need to develop a different understanding of worldwide interdependence and global common wellbeing. In such a concept, creativity would serve all. Can we develop an innovative, creative discourse about creativity and the wellbeing of *all* (nations, societies, individuals)? And can this discourse be translated into practice in a way that avoids naivety, however well-intentioned?

*Secondly*, we have all seen the damage caused by super-creative financiers and their innovative bubbles. The paradigm of the invincible market with minimal public intervention has collapsed. Creativity now means developing new models for organising economies that will almost tame the creativity of greed without replacing the market. The 'new public interest' in state and society is worth all creative efforts. Civil society will become as important as the state and the private sector.

*Thirdly*, the current crisis may speed up and finally deepen creative solutions for sustainable energy use and production.

*Fourthly*, sharing and engaging, saving instead of wasting, caring instead of fighting, competing while remaining aware of interdependence: these will require a new understanding of responsibilities and citizenship. Barack Obama has already made it clear that enjoying freedom and democracy, well-being and solidarity, peace and equality means, in practice, hard work and values. Citizenship has its price. Yet much creativity is needed to improve the political conditions for this ethical paradigm.

*Fifthly*, culture needs the arts as another source of knowledge besides science; at least, the arts in their radical freedom to question everything and to imagine the unimagined, in languages not yet spoken and images not yet seen. Lukewarm support for the freedom of the arts is not enough, nor can we trust all to the custodianship of the art-market. Creativity needs knowledge of the unknown; it is in basic artistic exploration – transcending business plans and the like – that new ideas are generated, often invisibly. New ideas for the common good demand creative partnerships between artists and civil society at large.

We need a creative Europe that starts looking into *humanity's* shared global agendas. We need a creative Europe that combines fun, competitiveness, equality, freedom, responsibility. We need a culture of responsibility, and creative citizenship that takes its responsibility to culture seriously. Otherwise, it will be struggle and conflict again. Or dreams only.