Creative and Cultural Industries as a Complicated and Contested Area.
An Interview with Professor Stuart Cunningham

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and the degree to which they are supported by government programs",
Stuart Cunningham, an internationally renowned media
and communications academic, argues in a conversation with JOCIS.

By Fulvia Santovito for JOCIS

JOCIS interviewed Stuart Cunningham on the concept and definition of creative industries, its importance in different markets, and the wider trend called "the culturalisation of the economy".

In your opinion, which subsectors should be considered as part of the creative industries and which should be excluded?

Stuart Cunningham: There has been a long and ongoing set of debates about this. They mostly relate to whether the GLAM (galleries, libraries, archives and museums) sector, or specific parts of that sector, should be in or out. The most rigorous approach to this question has been conducted by colleagues of mine through NESTA: http://www.nesta.org.uk/publications/dynamic-mapping-uks-creative-industries.

It seems that creative industries is more important in the American continent (especially Central America) and much less supported in European countries. What do you think about it? How is it in Australia? Do young people have many opportunities to work in the creative industries world?

Well, it's important to make a distinction between the importance of creative industries to economies per se, and the degree to which they are supported by government programs. The US has the largest creative industries sector in the world as a share of the total economy, but has one of the smallest government support programs for these industries. So when you say important, you mean important to countries because of the importance they place on the value – not only economic – of the creative industries. In that sense, it may be true that Central American countries treat them with more care from a governmental and societal point of view – I honestly wouldn't know. My sense is that the level of government support in European countries waivers with the degree to which they are recognised as economically significant. At a national level in Australia, policies to support the creative industries have run very hot and cold and, while certain states within the

country – Victoria, Queensland and others – have had their creative industries policy champions, it would be fair to say that the level of policy and program attention has been wavering at best.

I think universities' research is the base of new discoveries and new ways of feeling the arts. How has academic research of creative industries changed in the last 10 years? What are the major trends that you notice?

Academic research in the creative industries has tended to be divided between critical humanities attacking the supposedly neoliberal base on which they rest, and the much more applied approach in the social sciences, where substantial work has been done on the geographical and sectoral dynamics of the creative sector, as well as its labour and innovation policy issues. Read the Introduction (Disciplinary Dispositions) to my major book on the subject: Hidden Innovation: Policy, Industry and the Creative Sector.

What are the biggest debates within the media, communications and cultural studies?

Again, I refer you to Hidden Innovation: Policy, Industry and the Creative Sector where I analyse in detail debates within media communication and cultural studies about the creative industries. By and large, academics have been highly critical of the concept and as an advocate for the importance of creative industries in a social, cultural and economic sense, I have needed to engage these criticisms on many an occasion.

In your opinion what is the best way to build links between theory and practice of creative industries? How does it differ depending on the markets?

That's an extremely good question, and I refer you to the ARC Centre of Excellence in Creative Industries and Innovation at http://www.cci.edu.au/ which ran from 2005-2014 and is now a longer operating. I was its director for the length of its life, and its whole rationale was based on building links between theory and practice in the creative sector.

What are you working on at the moment?

You can get a very complete feel for what I am doing, especially since the end of the Centre of Excellence, by consulting https://eprints.qut.edu.au/view/person/Cunningham,_Stuart.html.

I have just completed and sent off to the publisher a major book, Social Media Entertainment: The new industry at the intersection of Hollywood and Silicon Valley.

What do you consider to be most important when developing creative and cultural policies for regions which appear to be more isolated and far from large urban centers?

Focus on what may be able to be done to keep young people from moving away, particularly enterprise creation that shows that there may be sustainable careers in the region; focus on cultural aspects of tourism, including adventure, green and cultural tourism; focus on what Internet-based enterprise can be stimulated such that distance is less of a factor; focus on the unique characteristics of the place, particularly if those characteristics have cultural elements.

When developing creative and cultural industries policies to attract talent, companies and investment, how important are clustering policies to achieve those goals?

This is a complicated and contested area, with huge investments in creative clusters being made in China for example. However, most successful large-scale creative clusters have developed organically rather than through policy intent, and over considerable periods of time. This doesn't mean that small-scale clustering can't be very beneficial to small businesses and sole traders who of course make up the large majority of the creative sector. They have been shown to work. So short answer: policy makers who want to adopt a cluster strategy, start small and build up. It's not at all clear that China's gargantuan cluster strategy works.

And as for the clustering policies, should there be a national approach or should it a regional approach? Which one do you consider to be more effective?

Typically, regional, for the above reasons.

The concept of creative industry is not consensual. Do you consider that is a concept created in the context of a political and economical agenda and narrative or it can already be considered a solid concept by the academy?

Creative industries as a concept is a creature of policymakers. It attempts to build some conceptual and policy dynamism around a set of shifts in economies – the so-called culturisation of the economy – that is real, no matter how much critical academics might want to write critiques. In Australia, Queensland University of Technology pioneered the adoption of the term, creating a Creative Industries Faculty in 2001. Since then, another at least seven universities have adopted the terminology. You can't beat reality.

What do you consider to be the main critical factors of success for a country/region to develop and position itself in the international context at the level of the creative economy?

Policies don't create the creative economy. They may assist, and they certainly can inhibit. The main critical success factors have got to do with rigorous, evidence-based, assessment of the creative economy capability in that country or region, and long-term, consistent focus on the reasons for support and follow-through on programs that are implemented and tested as to their efficacy.

References:

Stuart Cunningham (2016), Hidden Innovation: Creative industries policy in Australia, in Javier Castro Spila, Javier Echeverría, Alfonso Unceta eds, Hidden Innovation: Concepts, Sectors and Case Studies, Gipuzkoa, España: Sinnergiak Social Innovation, pp. 11-23. ISBN: 978-84-935346-2-2.

Stuart Cunningham (born in 1953) is Professor of Media and Communications, Queensland University of Technology, and Director of the Australian Research Council ARC Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation. He is well known for his contributions to media, communications and cultural studies and to their relevance to industry practice and government policy. He is a key figure in cultural policy studies and creative industries, he has written a number of influential books, including The Media and Communications in Australia. He was selected as one of a thousand notable Australians for the Australia 2020 Summit in Canberra in April 2008.