

Cultural entrepreneurship: the missing Brexit link

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Were an alien to land in the UK and browse our discussions over the UK economy and impacts of Brexit, they would be forgiven for thinking we are fundamentally reliant on two specific industries; finance and banking, and automotive manufacturing. It is therefore worth remembering that the UK economy is itself a fairly diverse entity.

In the spirit of this statement, and following my last blog on the re-emergence of British culture in response to market demands^[1], I wanted to focus on an often ignored segment of the national economy in Brexit debates: the creative and cultural industries and realm of the cultural entrepreneur.

Despite the creeping death of conservatism currently suffocating us, the cultural entrepreneur has both a significant role and a great history in the UK. We need only look back a few weeks to recognise one example. Before the unapologetic pomp and circumstance of Wimbledon, we enjoyed the splendour of 2019's Glastonbury Festival. Played out on the Vale of Avalon, in the shadow of the 'Once and Future King', this year saw its mythological promise upheld as the true queen of England, Kylie, played to a crowd the cynical stage management of the Brexit Party could but dream of.

Despite usual disapproving airs from the right-wing media, Glastonbury is a great example of cultural (and social) entrepreneurship in the spirit of that most English events: the village fete. And whilst an example on a serious dose of steroids, this reinvention of tradition has not only created a global brand attracting the most noteworthy artistes to a dairy farm in Somerset, but has seen community summer events follow suit to include music, performance, and the arts alongside their annual longest cucumber competition.

It is worth here pointing out that the creative and cultural sector has been one of the success stories of this century. The Automotive sector, with an £82bn turnover and 1m direct and indirect jobs^[2],

grabs the headlines through debates on the fate of its large operations. Yet the Creative Industries in 2017 contributed £101bn in GVA and provided 2m direct jobs, a number grown by 28% since 2011[3]. Considering the cultural segment of this sector alone – the arts and cultural industries – the value is not inconsiderable, with a £21bn turnover and direct and indirect employment of 244k[4].

Of greater importance in these days of uncertainty and low productivity growth is the high level of labour productivity found in the creative and cultural sector. Two key elements underwrite this productivity. First is a level of creative intensity not found in other occupation, and underwritten by an ethos of original content creation[5]. Second is a commitment to industry again little found outside the sector, as creative and cultural entrepreneurs are motivated as much by artistic freedom and achievement as monetary gains[6]. Both the level of commitment and entrepreneurialism in this sector are too often overlooked.

These values are integral components to something larger than simply economic outputs. Creative and cultural entrepreneurs help make places. In his book, *Cities in Civilisation*, the great urbanist Sir Peter Hall discussed the important role of culture and cultural interaction. This, he argued, created not only economic renewal and rejuvenation but also distinctive shared spaces and values.

Hall referred to this as the ‘urban glue’; an intangible which holds places together beyond simple dependency. London, our key regional economy, is arguably an example. Whilst it houses a concatenation of critical industries – finance, politics, media – this represents what Catherine McGuinness, Policy Chair at the City of London Corporation, recently described as “a global sector made up of global players, and they don’t have to be here”[7]. What this means is the tasks these people and their employers undertake could be done from anywhere; the reason they choose London is itself a concatenation of factors. A key one here is the cultural fabric of place, underwritten by ongoing inputs of the cultural entrepreneur.

Yet despite these hedonic contributions, the cultural entrepreneur remains something of an underdog in terms of support for their industry. Principally this has emerged in challenges around funding, where public grants are a key source and growing requirements have

emerged to link cultural activity to forms of social entrepreneurship. But more broadly, the cultural entrepreneur is often the poor cousin of their more mainstream equivalent.

This tendency has form across Government in particular. An interesting example, as anyone who watched BBC4's excellent 'Dance Britannia' will recall, is the nightclub Cream. Founded in 1992, at its height in an era of 'superstar DJs', Cream attracted thousands of clubbers to Liverpool. With them came significant spend. When faced with problems around organised crime, calls for assistance from the Government and the police were ignored despite both creating notable multipliers in a city with deprivation problems and being a treasury-contributing enterprise.

The legitimacy of the cultural entrepreneur seems to have barely advanced in intervening years. Consider the Edinburgh Festival, specifically the Fringe. An industry with an economic impact of £280m for the city^[8], this phenomenon rests on the shoulders of those bringing creative outputs to the city; cultural entrepreneurs in arts, in theatre, in music. Despite this, and the manic schedule any performer endures for up to four weeks straight (they do get a weekend off mid-August!), most come out of the experience in debt^[9]. Similarly at risk are those running venues^[10]. Yet without these cultural entrepreneurs and their goodwill, a £280m industry would collapse overnight.

Alongside these issues, cultural entrepreneurs work in conditions and with remuneration or benefits which, if applied to workers in manufacturing would lead to a second winter of discontent.

So, where does this leave the cultural entrepreneur in relation to the oncoming Brexit? What do we need to be discussing and thinking about as audibly as we discuss the automotive sector? In the absence of firm detail this is of course speculative, but three issues I would argue are here prevalent.

First is measures to maintain the melting pot of entrepreneurial ecosystems and brand of key cultural entities. A critical component here is openness, allowing for attracting the best talent and forging collaborations. As things stand, the existing visa system is seen as a major burden to attracting global talent to UK tours and festivals^[11].

This could conceivably worsen after freedom of movement within the EU is removed, with consequences for enterprises ranging from the Edinburgh International Festival to Birmingham's own more modest BE Festival.

Second is the funding system for the cultural and creative sector. We have seen calls to move to more mainstream forms of financing (for mainstream, read 'private capital'), encouraging cultural entrepreneurs to look at methods of commodifying their ventures. An element of the creative and cultural sector will however always require state-based sponsorship due to its high creative intensity and indirect financial and social impact. Realistically, in the event of a mythical 'Brexit bonus', this sector should be a net beneficiary.

Finally, further support for practitioners in this sector should be encouraged. With high levels of self-employment and freelancing, the industry sees significant risk absorbed by the entrepreneur. The challenges faced by workers in the 'gig economy' are all too familiar to the cultural entrepreneur. With such reliance on their goodwill in maintaining the integral cultural fabric of place, how can this goodwill be safeguarded and reinforced in a post-Brexit employment landscape?

[1] <https://centreforbrexitstudiesblog.wordpress.com/2019/06/17/why-do-brexiters-feel-british-identity-is-under-assault/>

[2] SMMT, <https://www.smmt.co.uk/industry-topics/uk-automotive/>

[3] Creative Industries Federation, <https://www.creativeindustriesfederation.com/statistics>

[4] Cebr, <https://bit.ly/2VYuyDn>

[5] DCMS, Creative Industries Economic Estimates, 2016.

[6] Mietzner & Kamprath (2013) A competence portfolio for professionals in the creative industries; Purnomo & Kristiansen (2018) Economic reasoning and creative industries progress.

[7] The Economist, <https://www.economist.com/podcasts/2019/07/02/brexit-and-the-city?fsrc=scn/tw/te/bl/ed/brexitandthecitymoneytalks>

[8] BOP Consulting, https://www.edinburghfestivalcity.com/assets/000/001/964/Edinburgh_Festivals_-_2015_Impact_Study_Final_Report_original.pdf?1469537463

[9] BBC, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-23778487>

[10] The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/jul/19/risky-business-edinburgh-fringe-hidden-costs-of-theatres>

[11] The National, <https://www.thenational.scot/news/17675126.fiona-hyslop-calls-for-an-end-to-edinburgh-festivals-visa-embarrassment/>