

Debate



ILLUSTRATION: ROMAN MURADOV

The question Has the word ‘creativity’ been corrupted?

Yes... social activist and lecturer *Oli Mould* argues that creativity has been highjacked by commercial concerns in a relentless pursuit of profit

Apparently everyone is creative. From the design of cities and national policies to how we prepare dinner, everything we do is infused with a sense of creativity. Our politicians, business leaders, line managers and even our friends and family demand that we be creative, as that is how we are told we can progress as a society. We live in the ‘creative age’.

No longer is creativity an attribute we associate with skilled artisans and visionaries; every person, every job and every place must be creative to survive. Even the fast-food chain Subway calls its shop staff ‘sandwich artists’. The concept of creativity is now so ubiquitous in modern-day parlance that any semblance of what creativity actually creates has been lost.

Put bluntly, this all-embracing idea of creativity covers up tangible problems across society. When we are asked to be ‘creative’ at work, what we are often being told is to be more flexible, more adaptable in our hours and practices and, potentially – for those without

the capital and social networks to allow for such flexibility – far more precarious. An app such as Uber may appear ‘creative’ to users, who can quickly and cheaply find a cab, but such flexibility can cause unpredictable work patterns that can be stressful for drivers.

In politics, one of the most chastening policy decisions since 2008 has been predicated on ‘doing more with less’. Now councils and third-sector institutions must be ‘creative’ with how they provide resources after their budgets have been slashed, even if that means no more free art classes, public libraries or meals on wheels.

The John Lewis Christmas advert may well be one of the most anticipated in the television calendar, but is it really that creative if all it is getting us to do is spend more money at John Lewis? Within our cities we have ‘creative spaces’ that supposedly inspire us to forge a better quality of urban life (think Box Park in Shoreditch, where fashion and food outlets are

housed in shipping containers). But these developments are specifically designed and placed to attract a wealthier class. And from there, (segre)gated, high-rise, highly secure and architecturally sterile residential blocks are thrown up, and outdoor public space is privatised.

Creativity is a corrupted concept because it is now a vehicle to maintain more of the same, namely the relentless pursuit of economic growth and profits. It is a neutral, vacuous and universally appealing pseudonym for processes that create unequal and unjust societies. Yet there is hope. Creativity can be far more useful, but it needs to be redefined as a collective attribute that looks beyond competitive and profit-generating practices towards a more equitable, sustainable and prosperous future.

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Oli Mould’s new book, Against Creativity, is published on 25 September by Verso

No... says psychologist *Dean Keith Simonton*, extending ‘creativity’ to science, technology, finance and every other field, makes perfect sense

Having devoted more than four decades to the scientific study of creative genius, I have encountered various ways that either creativity or genius have been restricted to a small subset of human achievements. The ancient Greeks, of course, had muses who were almost entirely confined to the arts – mostly various kinds of poetry, music and dance. To be sure, a muse was sometimes assigned to history (Clio) and astronomy (Urania), but it remains striking that both mathematics and philosophy – two primary vehicles for creative genius in antiquity – were left out.

Presumably mathematicians and philosophers didn’t need a muse, for pure reason sufficed to make great discoveries. Diverse versions of this stark dichotomy between creativity and logic can be seen throughout the centuries. For instance, the philosopher Immanuel Kant claimed that creative genius could only be found in the fine

arts. Even a mind as revolutionary as Isaac Newton could not count as a genuine ‘creator’, according to Kant.

As a creativity researcher, such attempts to impose disciplinary boundaries seem devoid of either empirical or logical justification. On the empirical side, cumulative scientific research has divulged a large inventory of processes and procedures that generate creative ideas in all domains. For example, trial-and-error plays a major role in all forms of creativity, whether art, science, technology or business. On the logical side, the very definition of creativity implies no disciplinary constraints. If a creative idea is defined as a thought that is jointly original, surprising and valuable, then why confine those criteria to the arts? The only stipulation is that the domain must be sufficiently well established and culturally esteemed so that the corresponding creators, experts, critics, audiences and consumers can

make worthwhile creativity assessments. We must recall that the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences of Oscar fame saw one of its roles as confirming cinema’s new status as the seventh art – after architecture, sculpture, painting, dance, music and poetry.

Admittedly, creativity varies in prominence across domains. Thus, scientists operate under more severe constraints regarding fact and logic than do artists. Only science fiction writers enjoy the ‘poetic licence’ to dispense with the fundamental laws of physics, chemistry or biology. Yet Einstein’s general theory of relativity, which radically transformed our understanding of the universe, exemplifies creative genius just as much as Picasso’s *Guernica*.

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Dean Keith Simonton’s new book, The Genius Checklist, is published on 25 September by MIT Press