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# Creative Economy, Degrowth and Aesthetic Limitation

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## Introduction

An increasing number of critical social science, arts and humanities scholars are turning their attention to studying the ecological<sup>1</sup> impacts of cultural and creative industries production. For example, within media studies, researchers have identified the general necessity of ‘greening the media’ (Maxwell and Miller, 2012), the finitude of the globe and the contribution of media to the destruction of natural resources within it (Cubitt, 2015), the exploitative labour and environmental relations of the communications industries (Qiu, 2016), the need to develop more ‘sustainable journalism’ (Miller, 2015), and the social burdens imposed by dealing with toxic media and e-waste (Lepawsky, 2018). Researchers have sought to imagine new post-capitalist ‘media ecologies’ where technology companies are made to bear the full cost of their exploitation and despoilment of persons and planetary resources (Caraway, 2017). In similar vein, Murdock (2018) has argued for a new ‘moral economy of machines’ that might help bring media industries to task for their accelerated ‘resource depletion, energy use, pollution and waste’ (2018, p. 5). In cultural policy, Maxwell and Miller (2017) have called for further ‘greening’ – criticising those arts and cultural agencies which do little to take into account the true ecological costs of their aesthetic and organisational endeavours. In seeking positive solutions, theorists of cultural industries work and organisations have proposed alternative economic models that privilege community subsistence and mutual aid over unfettered economic growth, and new research on cultural co-ops and non-profits, and different kinds of ‘sharing’ economy is rapidly emerging (e.g. see Boyle and Oakley, 2018; de Peuter and Cohen, 2015; Oakley and Ward, 2018, Sandoval, 2017). Geographers are challenging the existing models of ‘creative cities’ by proposing more ecologically-sound and sustainable forms of urban cultural production (Grodach et al, 2017; Kagan and Hahn, 2011). In environmental humanities and the arts various approaches have been taken to promote the creation of green, sustainable or ecologically conscious art and cultural production (Brady, 2016), with some of the most innovative research being undertaken in the field of post-carbon humanities (Szeman and Boyer, 2017) and ecological design (Ehrenfeld, 2009; Escobar, 2017).

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<sup>1</sup> Ecological referring generally to the symbiotic and integral relations between people, animals, processes and environment; and more specifically in the case of this project the relations between *the social, the economic and the environmental*.

While these interventions are highly valuable, none have yet focussed specifically on the ‘creative economy’ or creative economy *policy per se*, as a powerful and distinctive field of knowledge and activity where most of the aforementioned cultural, media and creative industries are theorised, activated and contained. Certainly, none of these researches have attempted to construct an overarching account of how the creative economy itself, as a distinctive policy object, might benefit from being re-theorised as a set of *ecological* - and not simply economic – endeavours. The aim of this chapter is to help at least part remedy this omission by trying to situate current discourse and thinking around the ‘creative economy’ in a more expansive theoretical frame, one that seeks to address this lack of ecological concern and – more specifically – challenge the foundational premise of economic *growth* that animates and energises this absence.

### **The Growth Imperative**

While the creative economy has emerged over two decades as a kind of ‘global orthodoxy’ (Schlesinger, 2017), it has no single or agreed definition. For UNCTAD (2018, no pagination) the creative economy is:

‘...an evolving concept which builds on the interplay between human creativity and ideas and intellectual property, knowledge and technology. Essentially it is understood as the knowledge-based economic activities upon which the ‘creative industries’ are based’.

For the UK’s Nesta (2013, 34) the creative economy is ‘those economic activities which involve the use of creative talent for commercial purposes’. Mostly the term tends to be used as a convenient shorthand to capture the full range of ‘cultural and creative sectors’ (European Commission, 2018) – the total sum of all designated arts, media, and cultural and creative industries. While the meaning and level of uptake of the creative economy concept has varied between nations, as Schlesinger (2017, 86) notes, it has proved highly transactable as a ‘self-sustaining, self-referential framework of ideas’ where the idea of culture as possessing a ‘tradeable economic value’ is treated as paramount.

Today, the policies of advanced capitalist economies such as the UK, Australia, Canada, France, Germany, and the wider European Union<sup>2</sup> all strongly promote the creative economy as central to the future of national economic *growth*. Highly optimistic growth scenarios (and some real uplift in output) have been widely attributed to creative economy businesses. As well as offering economic benefits, the creative economy comes laden with narratives of cultural dynamism, modernisation and

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<sup>2</sup> See for example Bazalgette (2017), Canada Heritage (2017), DCMS (2016), DDCMS (2017, 2018), Dossi (2016), European Commission (2018), France Creative (2013), Government of Australia (2013), and in Germany (BMW, 2017); HM Government (2017; 2018).

change, allowing governments to associate themselves with positive recovery, and a renascent futurism that suggests advanced capitalism might (at last) begin to shake off the hangover of the global financial crisis. Yet I want to argue that the creative economy's *growth imperative* is one that we need foundationally to challenge, for at least four good reasons.

Firstly, the imperative is highly questionable, even in its own **economic** terms. Many leading economists (and from across the political spectrum) have argued that advanced capitalism has become systemically mired in 'secular stagnation'; that is, a period of sclerosis where flat or zero real growth rates are now being anticipated for the foreseeable future (e.g. see Krugman, 2014; Stiglitz, 2017; Summers, 2014). Aggregate demand is static or falling, and being compounded as real productive investment is further sacrificed to support the short-term goals of financialisation (Mazzucato, 2018). While the '1%' might continue to cream the profits and rents of financialised capitalism, sub-par growth projections for the most advanced economies point to the fundamental weaknesses of capitalism in its late form. It becomes a moot point therefore that the creative economy is allegedly growing when the wider economy on which its success ultimately depends is likely to be stagnant and *non-growing* in the medium to longer term. It's also important to note that any recognised creative economy growth has tended to be highly uneven, both geographically and sectorally, tending to be concentrated in 'global' cities and reliant on the heavy-lifting provided by those computing, software and IT industries that have long dominated (and skewed) the overall statistical estimates of activity in the creative sector. Much of this activity is only 'creative' (and certainly 'cultural') in the very loosest sense. In the UK, the recent renaming of the responsible ministry from the Department of Culture, Media and Sport to the Department of *Digital*, Culture, Media and Sport indicates the weight of priority now afforded the digital and technology-led sub-sectors. Further, even if compound growth were to crank back into life, jump-started by something like a reinvigorated neoliberalism, a return to Keynesian policies, or even, it must be said, a wholly growth-oriented 'green new deal' (see Pollin, 2018), we would still need to note that the creative economy, like the economy as a whole, 'is a sub-system of a larger system, the ecosphere, which is finite, non-expanding, [and] materially closed' (Daly, 2018, 88), and so any economic development premised on continually expanding GDP will eventually hit some hard ecological and bio-spherical limits. Given these constraints to economic growth it now seems more imperative to explore alternative economic models and priorities other than growth – such as those premised on radical forms of redistribution, subsistence and, potentially, restriction.

Secondly, in **social** terms, while some kind of economic growth might be necessary (especially as a means of alleviating poverty in developing economies, e.g. see Sternberg, 2013) in the advanced capitalist economies the question of what kind (and level) of growth we might now want to encourage has become a more open question. There is convincing evidence to show measures of well-being and

life satisfaction have stalled (or reversed) in developed nations even as economic output has grown (Jackson, 2009; Mazzucato, 2018; Skidelsky and Skidelsky, 2012; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009). It could also be argued that if the pursuit of growth is no longer bringing the general benefits and utilities that are being claimed for it, then this might be *even more so* for the creative economy than for elsewhere. One reason for this is that the creative economy relies heavily on those cultural-symbolic commodities (or ‘positional goods’ as Fred Hirsch (1976) originally termed them) that often provide the basis for social distinction, status and competition. Economic growth can never fully satisfy the demand for positional goods, since newness, novelty and scarcity are at their very essence – the more popular the good, the less special or satisfyingly distinctive it becomes, and so the more the demand for new goods arises in a world where the desire for new commodities now seems limitless. Hyper-consumption is also socially disaggregating – since it not only encourages resource depletion but also reinforces damaging social inequalities and helps reduce life to individualised competitions for social power or class status (Lewis, 2013). There are limits to how far we might want to accept such arguments, of course - not least because they tend to disclaim many of the progressive social innovations, resources, rewards and pleasures occasioned and enabled by capitalism and growth - but this doesn’t disaffirm the necessity of social critiques, nor their now more urgent importance. One of the arguments for developing a new perspective focused strongly on principles of social justice (rather than unobtainable compound growth) is to help tackle the persistent and deep-rooted structural inequalities that have so perniciously excluded and disadvantaged women, ethnic minorities, working-class people and other socially disadvantaged groups in the creative economy workplace (Banks, 2007; 2017; McRobbie 2016; Oakley and O’Brien 2016; Saha, 2018). As research has repeatedly shown, contrary to popular belief, the creative economy does not so much challenge social inequalities as structurally reinforce them.

Thirdly, when it comes to **environmental** issues, creative economy policy has largely been silent. Partly, this comes from the politically convenient but unfounded myth that the creative industries are naturally ‘cleaner’ or more ecologically benign (see Maxwell and Miller, 2017). In reality, the cultural and creative industries are highly resource-intensive and often flagrantly and dangerously polluting. This includes many of the world’s leading digital technology and communications companies, the global film and television industries, publishing, music and the transport, circulation and logistical systems that sustain them (Caraway, 2017; Cubitt, 2015; Devine, 2019; Maxwell and Miller, 2017; Murdock, 2018). Furthermore, while relative ‘decoupling’ might frequently occur, as commodity production becomes more efficient, the idea of absolute decoupling - that technological innovations and efficiency-savings in production will be sufficient to ensure that economic growth can continue without fatally damaging ecological capacity – now looks an unrealistic hope (Bellamy-Foster et al, 2009; Jackson, 2009). The overall expansion in demand for new use – and new commodities – will far outstrip any resource and energy efficiency savings in the individual production of any one

commodity (the so-called *Jevon's Paradox*). This is without even considering the enormous problems of waste and disposal occasioned by digital communications industries, fashion, music, film and television and so on, and the human and environmental costs of disassembly and dumping, mostly imposed on nations of the Global South (Lepawsky, 2018). We might reasonably conclude that in its current incarnation, the creative economy - and the policy framework that supports it - is not only failing to deliver on its own promises for clean, inclusive and sustainable growth (Bazalgette, 2017, DDCMS, 2018), it may be undermining the prospects of societies making the necessary shift towards more sustainable economies, in general.

Finally, there is the further (and perhaps more familiar) **cultural** objection, that the relentless co-joining of the creative economy to ideologies of economic growth has served to crowd out alternative visions of arts, media and culture as shared public goods, or as articulations of collective cultural interests and political identifications – including ones that might form the basis of a *critique* of growth and economism themselves (Banks, 2018; Banks and O'Connor, 2017, Oakley, Ball and Cunningham, 2018; Schlesinger, 2017). This is a problem since, often, the productive energies contained and released by the creative economy are not necessarily directed towards the priority of economic growth, but instead used to furnish desires for different forms of life that might reject such a priority entirely. Yet, in the policy discourse it's clear that culture (long since re-badged as 'creativity') is now mostly understood in apolitical terms - as a benign and ambient resource first recognised for its 'tradeable value'. For instance, in the UK, policy and discourse on creative economy have become more tightly harnessed to a bland, technocratic agenda whose prevailing imaginary is that culture is that which is 'creative', 'digital', 'immersive' and *good for growth*, and that it will provide only benefits for both producers and consumers in evolving sets of market or quasi market-exchanges (DDCMS, 2017; 2018; HM Government, 2017; 2018). But, for the reasons I've outlined, this is a broken model and, ultimately, an unsustainable one.

Thus, for a combination of reasons, I would argue it has become necessary to question the orthodoxy that identifies growth as the primary social objective of creative economy policy. Various approaches to 'sustainable development', 'inclusive growth' and 'urban prosperity' have recently been mooted, yet all of these regard continued economic growth in a fundamentally unchanged system as a desirable and achievable norm (Florida, 2017, OECD, 2012, RSA, 2017, Throsby, 2017). But, arguably, such assumptions seem increasingly optimistic.

Thus, for the remainder of the chapter I want to explore – as indicative illustration - just *one* of the many possible alternatives proposed to the economic 'growthmania' (Daly, 2018) that continues to fuel the conventional economy, and - by extension - the creative economy within it. The particular approach I outline argues that transitioning to a genuinely sustainable world economy must not only

involve finding ways to materially restrict and limit certain kinds of economic, social and environmental activity, but to also shrink them in real and substantial terms – in short, to *degrow* them. In the next section, I introduce this resurgent theory of *degrowth*, and assess its current usefulness in the context of developing critical-ecological approaches to creative economy study.

### **Towards Creative ‘Degrowth’?**

Amongst the range of more ecologically-oriented approaches to economy, a theory of degrowth has re-emerged from its diverse origins in 1970s cultural criticism, ecological economics and political and environmental activism. Foundational texts such as *The Entropy Law and the Economic Process* (Georgescu-Roegen, 1971), *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al, 1972), *The No-Growth Society* (Olson and Landsberg, 1974) and *Steady-State Economics* (Daly, 1977) paved the way for a recently revived and re-invigorated set of debates between (amongst others) economists, sociologists, environmental scientists and cultural and political theorists (see Alier, 2009; D’Alisa et al, 2015; Kallis, 2018). Yet, degrowth is not reducible to a single definition or approach, and is perhaps best understood as an interdisciplinary ensemble of practices and perspectives that displays some common emphases, as one of its leading exponents here argues:

‘Degrowth signifies, first and foremost, a critique of growth. It calls for the decolonisation of public debate from the idiom of economism and for abolition of economic growth as a social objective. Beyond that, degrowth also signifies a desired direction, one in which societies will use fewer natural resources and will organize and live differently than today. ‘Sharing’, ‘simplicity’, ‘conviviality’, ‘care’ and the ‘commons’ are primary significations of what this society might look like’ (Kallis et al, 2015, p. 3).

It is a characteristic of degrowth approaches to consider ‘sustainable development an oxymoron’ (Demaria et al, 2013, 196) and to argue instead for *actually* sustainable forms of economy that must inherently be more localized, socialized and ecologically-directed. As well as advocating prioritisation of a more general ecological consciousness and restraint, a key economic principle of degrowth is that a sustainable scale of resource use is that which can be deployed or allocated at a level of throughput that does not threaten the viability of the ecosystem from which it is obtained. Resources must be extracted at a scale and intensity that is renewable or regenerative, and should not generate wastes or externalities beyond the absorptive capacity of the local system or system as a whole. Furthermore, degrowth places strong emphasis on social justice issues, arguing that significant benefits might be gained from emphasising greater equality and social equity in the social distribution and allocation of already existing (as well as future) resources and opportunities (Kallis, et al, 2015). Of further concern here is intra- and inter-generational justice – meaning that there should be a fairer and more equitable

allocation of sustainable resources across existing social populations, and recognition of the need to bequeath socially-just arrangements for future and (where possible) past generations (Cosme, et al 2015). Degrowth perspectives therefore prioritise the kinds of sociabilities that place non-economic aspects of human well-being, mutual care and concern at the heart of economic activity and planning in ways that are not growth-dependent (Daly, 2018; Jackson, 2009). In short, degrowth proposes a *strong reversal* of the current economic orthodoxy that regards the earth as a limitless or endlessly-renewable resource amenable and resilient to anthropocentric exploitation, with exponents calling for a ‘democratically-led redistributive downsizing of production and consumption in industrialised countries as a means to achieve environmental sustainability, social justice and well-being’ (Demaria et al, 2013, p. 209).

While such a radical agenda might appear complementary to a more ecologically-oriented approach to creative economy thinking, its notable that degrowth thinking has not yet been substantively applied to the cultural or creative industries or the wider creative economy in which they sit. I’d suggest there are three main reasons for this:

- Firstly, and coming from within degrowth theory itself, there appears some reluctance or uncertainty about theorising art, culture or creative production (see D’Alisa et al, 2015). This might be because of negative associations of such practices with liberal or advanced consumer capitalism, or because such activities might be seen as secondary to the more ‘serious’ business of conceiving of the kinds of austere living that might be required under conditions of environmental degradation, restriction or scarcity. It might be that art and culture are regarded as non-essential or mere ephemera. Yet, in its cultural quietism, degrowth theory reinforces a somewhat traditional, political and scientific prejudice against recognising the necessity of locating art, media and culture (and cultural studies) at the heart of the social formation. While the many existing approaches to ‘green’ cultural production or ‘ecological art’ (e.g. Brady, 2016) might suggest good potential for linkages to degrowth thinking, there is currently no developed theory of culture or creative production contained within any of the (albeit, still re-nascent) degrowth theories or frameworks. This is to the detriment of degrowth theory, generally, in my view. Even if a degrown world eventually emerges it will both require and demand different forms of cultural and creative production – and we therefore need a theory of culture, creativity and technology, as well as art and aesthetics, in any envisaged degrowth scenarios.
- Secondly, discussion of ‘degrowth’ (or even close counterpart concepts such as ‘post-growth’) has not been prominent in the creative economy partly because the animating energies and imagination of the creative economy are now so entirely *congruent* with a

growth-led agenda. The creative sector has become so widely idealised as new, novelty-driven, cutting-edge and technologically innovative, that to suggest the need for some kind of restriction or limitation on its activities is to propose an economic heresy. As Philip Schlesinger has remarked, it's actually become quite difficult '*not* to talk approvingly and largely uncritically' (Schlesinger, 2017, p. 1) about the creative economy and its growth priorities, in public policy fora. In the UK, for example, the current Industrial Strategy and Creative Industries Sector Deal remains hitched to a growth agenda that only superficially supports the most conventional of sustainable development principles, and evidences little enthusiasm for any kind of strong ecological programme or green industrial strategy.

- Thirdly, despite the long existence of oppositional or ecological art, most of the conventional ideas of creativity, aesthetics and cultural production that underpin the creative economy remain premised on an array of ideas rooted in enlightenment, liberal and modernist notions of innovation, progress and growth, strongly enabled by carbon and resource-rich economies, and activated by autonomous individuals who have tended to prioritise the pursuit of personal 'creative freedoms' over other social priorities. The cultural and creative industries are so deeply-rooted in ideologies of unfettered personal expression and free creative agency, they might appear strongly antithetical to any politics that seems premised on shrinkage, limitation or restraint or on socially collectivized and communal – rather than individual - responses to ecological crises of various kind.

These latter two points hint most at what I think is a real problem for importing any kind of 'degrowth' or principles of restriction into creative economy thinking – the difficulty in breaking down the association of degrowth with some potentially unappealing forms of austerity and *limitation* (Latouche, 2012; Roth, 2017<sup>3</sup>). To any given artist or cultural producer, taken at face value, degrowth might simply appear as a kind of hair-shirted asceticism or exercise in joylessness – a difficult sell to anyone demanding the right to 'freely' create for an audience of diverse publics with an infinite panoply of tastes. But it's not merely about degrowth's apparent potential for curtailing artistic freedom or tendencies for gloomily 'propounding a society of sobriety' (Latouche, 2012, 77). There is also the serious concern that any imposing of ecological limits (and radical exiting of the conventional economy) is a strategy that might just as easily used to support socially oppressive or authoritarian regimes, as challenge them. And as the current rise of right-wing environmentalism has shown, there is nothing intrinsically radical or progressive in 'green' politics (Aronoff, 2019). A key challenge, therefore, for conjoining any kind of degrowth and creative economy perspective is to create a progressive political project that can more equitably share and genuinely sustain a world of

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<sup>3</sup> As Steffen Roth writes: 'people find it hard to define their lives as footprints of their omissions and abstinences as long as these forms of *less* are not good for a *more* of something' (2017, 1038)

scarce resources, while also retaining some sense of cultural production that can satisfy human desires for both individual (and more shared) expressive creativity.

## Conclusion

Is degrowth a useful concept for helping us to re-imagine a progressive future for the creative economy? Perhaps. What *is* certain is that how we choose to address the difficult challenges posed by accelerated ecological crisis is going to be central in establishing just how far the cultural and creative industries will continue in more or less sustainable and socially-just ways. While the language of degrowth points us towards an important consideration – that some human activities will simply have to stop – it also runs the risk of flattening the discourse into one that fails to take account of what *precisely* we need to desist from and what we might we might also need to expand. This, ultimately, is about distinguishing between the different quantitative and qualitative dimensions of growth (Roth, 2017). The % rate of GDP growth offers a proxy measure indicative of an unsustainable expansion and resource use that *must* end, but, in contrast, say, life expectancies, clean air, good education and jobs, social welfare supports, technology in service of common goods, are amongst the many things we might argue need to expand and grow. Quality of life and providing majority opportunities to survive and flourish, *including the opportunity to engage in the work of cultural production*<sup>4</sup>, need to be expanded rather than contracted.

Perhaps the immediate aspect of this challenge, at least for academic and activist critics, is establishing how something like a ‘degrowth’ perspective (or some substantive equivalent) can be given visibility and traction in the cultural and creative industries, especially when such activities are being more readily subsumed under an economic discourse and regime. One starting point might be to continue to insist on the principle that cultural and creative production is not just economically important, but also vital to human sociability, sustainment and collective well-being. Culture is partly that which allows us to better examine and evaluate the conditions of life, as well as provide the experiential pleasures that make life worth living – and however unpropitious the conditions for doing so, we need to resist the ever more frequent attempts to deny, discredit (and de-fund) this principle. Beyond this, the broader political aim, in my view, must also be to theorise and enact ecological perspectives that aim to guarantee a future sustainability for cultural production, but that *also* retain some commitment to expressive aesthetics, sensory human pleasures, and social and political values that makes culture so creative, distinctive and meaningful. If we think of this, as I do, as potentially a

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<sup>4</sup> In a professional and not just amateur sense; degrowth perspectives tend to place cultural production firmly in the realm of leisure, often content to imagine (in Marx-like fashion) post-work utopias where people can enjoy ‘being creative and spending unnecessary and unproductive time in experimenting with beauty [where] the right to philosophize, to play, to sing or to write will be communal’ (Kallis, 2018, 121). This is fine, but cultural production is not yet theorised as part of a vibrant and functioning ‘degrown’ or post-growth *economy*.

kind of *creative degrowth* we might begin to imagine a form of ecologically-sustainable production that strives positively to accommodate (rather than deny or frustrate) human needs and desires for art and aesthetics, creativity and culture. Yet, perhaps, given ecological pressures and crises, ‘creative degrowth’ would not simply be a restricted version of ‘business as usual’ or ‘doing the same with less’ – it would involve devising fundamentally new relations to aesthetics, creativity and cultural production more suitable for the conditions of ecological crisis present and to come, a form of post-carbon aesthetics, that doesn’t rely on the toxic infrastructures of an existing social apparatus. Developing a theory of something like ‘creative degrowth’ (or perhaps ‘creative post-growth’ or a radical cultural sustainment) might therefore have three key dimensions:

- The production new theoretical approaches to art and aesthetics, creativity and cultural production better attuned to a creative economy of more resource-restricted and ecologically at-risk societies;
- The provision of theoretically-informed models for new kinds of creative economy organisation, work and employment where activity is not predicated on (unsustainable) economic growth but on post- or degrowth thinking and the fostering of a sustainable human well-being and prosperity;
- The enabling and enacting of ecologically renewable and sustainable cultural production that also positively strives to accommodate *human sensory pleasures, needs and desires* for art, creativity and culture, sufficient to ensure the shared and collective production of creative goods of diverse aesthetics, design and value.

From this starting point, we might start to better imagine and enact how creative art, media and cultural production might actually look, feel or sound like in our ecologically-challenged present and futures to come. Under such terms, the creative economy might be seen as a site for ‘growth’ of a different kind – as a potential investment in an expansion of economic sustainment, a more collective and creative sociability and flourishing, and as a source of social and cultural values that might assume no subordinate status to economic growth and profit-making.

There is much conceptual (and practical) work that creative economy academics and practitioners will need to contribute here – and no easy answers. Those who write about the cultural and creative industries, and the creative economy more widely, will need to be more explicit about the kinds of economies, social relations and cultural expressions we would choose to support, and, ultimately, the kind of physical and immaterial world(s) we might want people to inhabit (Levitas, 2017). We will also need to think again about the ‘goods’ of creative degrowth, or post-growth, or the unfolding conjuncture, and work to ensure these goods are more fully socialised in a dual sense; that is, made

more evenly and equitably redistributed in terms of benefits and reward structures, as well as conceived in more holistic terms that attribute equivalent significance to the diversity of social, environmental and cultural values and imaginaries that sit alongside those economic priorities that have come to so perniciously (and now ominously) dominate our conventional understandings of growth, prosperity and the good life to come.

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