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**Towards Post-Growth Creative Economies?  
Building Sustainable Cultural Production in Argentina**

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**Introduction**

In the light of ecological crisis and the continued downturn in capitalist economies there is now an urgent need for the creative and cultural industries to offer more genuinely alternative and sustainable models of organising and production. By this we mean ways of making cultural goods that do not rest on assumptions of (neoliberal) capitalist economy or champion the virtues of expansive and unchecked ‘growth’, but seek instead to challenge these conventional (and now increasingly failing) understandings, norms and practices. Therefore, in this chapter, we wish to highlight the existence and emergence of some incipient ‘ecological’, ‘alternative’ or ‘post-growth’ forms of cultural industries production that appear to offer different ways of ‘thinking and doing’ the creative economy<sup>1</sup>. We will draw on our own shared theoretical interests in ‘post-growth’ thinking and on the particular empirical work undertaken by one of us (Serafini) in Argentina, to provide a case illustration of how post-growth and ecological imaginaries are productively combining to effect new forms of socially-aggregating and sustainable cultural production. Our broader point, however, is that the creative economy must be made more genuinely sustainable in *all* locations in order to help counter any further intensification of an already established set of economic and ecological problems and crises.

**Creativity Economy and Ecological Crisis**

For us, the ecological crisis (by which we mean the total and integrated set of economic, social and environmental challenges now faced by global populations) means that some of the foundational assumptions that underpin the creative economy must be brought into serious question. This includes the widespread belief that the cultural and creative industries

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<sup>1</sup> Broadly defined as the aggregate of all cultural and creative industries, arts, media and technology-led industrial sectors. More specifically it tends to be defined (in the UK at least) as all the people employed in the officially designated ‘creative industries’ (whether these people have creative jobs or not) plus all the people working in creative occupations employed in ‘non-creative’ industries.

are somehow ecologically ‘greener’, ‘cleaner’ or simply more benign than other, more traditional industries (see Maxwell and Miller, 2017). Compared to ‘smokestack’ industries or primary extraction or manufacturing, the cultural and creative industries tend to be presented as better by nature. This, however, is a dangerous and damaging assumption – for a number of reasons:

- Firstly, the creative and cultural industries are highly resource-dependent, energy-intensive and often seriously polluting. This includes many of the world’s leading digital media technology companies, the global film and television industries, publishing, music and the transport, circulation and logistical systems that sustain them (see Banks, 2018; Devine, 2017; Maxwell and Miller, 2017; Murdock, 2018 for examples).
- Secondly, while the creative economy still tends to be favoured as a ‘positive’ solution to problems of economic restructuring, often through cultural and ‘creative class’ regeneration of urban space, research has consistently revealed the creative economy to be also associated with destructive forms of gentrification, displacement and valuable resource-use (Novy and Colomb, 2013; Oakley and O’Connor, 2015).
- Thirdly, it has become apparent that many hundreds of thousands of low-paid and poorly treated workers are working in degraded or unsafe environments, involved in the global extraction and supply chain of raw materials, and in processes of manufacture producing the creative economy goods that Global North countries most avidly consume (Chan et al, 2016; Qui, 2016). Additionally, the global trade and circulation of waste, e-waste and detritus of the creative economy creates problems of disposal, disassembly, toxic hazard, ill-health and death – especially in the poorer nations of the Global South (Cubitt, 2015; Lepawsky, 2018).
- Finally, the optimistic idea that growth can always be progressively ‘decoupled’ from environmental impacts is becoming increasingly regarded as a comforting - but highly dangerous - delusion (D’Alisa et al, 2015; Jackson, 2009; Kallis, 2018). For example, in the creative economy context, we already have evidence of how the rapidly expanding demand for electronic communications devices (phones, tablets, etc.) will generate environmental costs that will likely outstrip any savings made by efficiency

improvements in the manufacture and design of individual devices themselves (Caraway, 2017; Maxwell and Miller, 2017).

The creative economy is not the solution to, nor separated from, ecological crisis, but is intrinsically *part of* a wider capitalist-expansionist system now facing some serious (and potentially catastrophic) social, economic and environmental challenges. That the future-oriented (but resource-hungry) creative economy has thus far failed to consider these challenges in any significant way is deeply troubling, and demands an urgent and combined intellectual, industry and policy response.

### **Challenging the Growth Imperative**

We want to suggest that one of the key problems and barriers to progressive change in late-capitalist economies (and the creative economy sectors within them), is the relentless and uncritical pursuit of *economic growth*. We note there is almost nothing in the economic policies of advanced capitalist nations that seeks to question growth as the primary socio-economic objective, or that considers the potentially damaging consequences of a commitment to unlimited economic expansion. Yet growth, as an idea, is in trouble. Firstly, the global financial crisis of 2007 has not only further curtailed (already falling) rates of growth, but brought to light that per capita GDP across the OECD nations, as well as labour productivity, has been declining for almost half a century (Jackson, 2018). Many mainstream economists are arguing that advanced capitalist economies have entered a phase of long term ‘secular stagnation’ - sustained low, flat or zero real growth rates over time (Krugman, 2014; Summers, 2014). Secondly, in social terms, while *some* kind of economic growth might initially be as vital and necessary (especially in so-called ‘developing’ nations) as economies become more ‘advanced’ the question of what kind (and what level) of economic growth might need to be sustained becomes more contested. There is some evidence to show measures of human happiness, well-being, life expectancy and life satisfaction have stalled (or reversed) in the Global North even as economic output has increased (Jackson, 2009; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2013). Growth is also problematic in that - where it residually occurs - it seems increasingly to be benefitting the more privileged members of societies at the expense of ordinary populations, as wealth has consistently failed to ‘trickle-down’ and social inequalities and injustices become more deeply entrenched (Piketty, 2017). Finally, in environmental terms, the pursuit of growth is arguably having some catastrophic

consequences in terms of accelerated global warming and climate change, and a whole host of destructive and damaging sub-systemic effects – such as unsustainable resource extraction, land clearances, pollution, waste, population displacements and species extinctions. The mantra of growth sweeps all before it – yet the disastrous consequences of endlessly seeking to produce more, and produce more quickly, are barely registered in the state (and creative economy) policy context.

Indeed, the pursuit of growth remains a foundational premise of creative economy thinking. In the policies of advanced capitalist economies such as Australia, Canada, France, Germany and the UK<sup>2</sup> and in cross-national initiatives such *Creative Europe* 2014-2020 (EU, 2014) the dominant theme is investment in culture and creativity significantly boosts national output. Similarly, there are routine (but unfounded) claims that the creative economy is more socially inclusive, open and egalitarian than other industrial sectors (see Banks, 2017 for a strong refutation) and that the innovations and affordances offered up by new media, VR, AI, advanced computing and technology will ensure the creative economy can be expanded within safe and sustainable environmental limits. Indeed, much creative economy policy and advocacy takes for granted the ongoing security and integrity of the natural environment and neglects any consideration of how creative economy production might negatively impact on sustainment of systems of global ecology. For example, prominent interventions such as the UK's *Culture is Digital* (DDCMS, 2018), *Creative Industries Sector Deal* (HM Government, 2018) and the *Independent Review of the Creative Industries* (Bazalgette, 2017), the *Creative Canada Policy Framework* (Canada Heritage, 2017) and *France Créative* (2013) make no reference to environmental or ecological issues, at all. The EU's *Creative Europe* 2014-2020 Programme has no explicitly environmental or ecological objectives beyond promoting 'sustainable' (in this case meaning 'continuous') growth. Similarly, in emerging economies, and in the Global South, for example in Latin America (Avogadro, 2016; Kon, 2016; WEF, 2016) and countries of Africa, the creative economy is commonly tied to pro-growth (and not just pro-development) agendas that tend to talk up the economic growth potential of creative industries, but mostly neglect to consider the wider ecological dimensions, in either economic, social or environmental terms (e.g. British Council, 2016; Hruby, 2018).

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<sup>2</sup> See for example Government of Australia (2013), France Creative (2013), (Canada Heritage, 2017).

This is not to say that ‘alternative’ or wider ecological concerns are *entirely* absent from mainstream creative economy policy discourse. Beyond the Global North we find some preliminary attempts to theorise and promote more sustainable and ecologically-sensitive creative economies in ‘developing’ nations, for example as presented in the UNESCO/UNITAD *Creative Economy Report* (2013). While such interventions appear to strongly favour more sustainable and ecologically-sensitive modes of creative economy development, a common fall-back position is to support the conventional ‘sustainable development’ paradigm which has always been primarily GDP and growth-led (see Alier, 2009; Demaria et al, 2013). While it might be argued that some initial growth is required in creative economies of the Global South (see Sternberg, 2017), we would argue that the ultimate goal should not be replication of growth imperatives nor the pursuit of the (unsustainable) ‘sustainable development’ model of advanced capitalist nations, over time.

Yet, we should also note that outside of the creative economy mainstream *other* possible worlds are already being conceived of and formed – ones that reject core assumptions of capitalist economy and disavow any easy and unproblematic commitment to creative economy growth in an assumed world of stable and unlimited abundance.

### **Alternative Models to Growth**

In recent years, precipitated by intensifying global crisis, a literature on ‘post-growth’ ‘anti-growth’ or ‘degrowth’ has emerged, concerned with highlighting the limits and failures of the capitalist economy, and proposing alternatives that seek ways to maintain the means of life for world populations within a more shared and collective, as well as ecologically-balanced, set of socio-economic structures and frameworks (e.g. Daly, 2018; Demaria et al, 2013; Gibson-Graham, 2006; Jackson, 2018; Kallis, 2018; Roth, 2017). Creative economy theorists have recently started to make connections to this literature – but the potential for further productive engagement is now significant (see Banks, 2018; Oakley and Ward, 2018). Additionally, in the creative economy context, there is a growing literature on alternative models of economic organising, including work on community provisioning, subsistence and mutual aid (e.g. see de Peuter and Cohen, 2015). Researches on cultural and creative co-operatives, non-profits, and different kinds of sharing or social economy is also emerging (Boyle and Oakley, 2018; Sandoval, 2017). New theorisations that challenge existing models

of ‘creative cities’ by proposing more ecologically-sound and sustainable urban cultural production are further evolving (Grodach et al, 2017; Kagan and Hahn, 2011).

The value of such work is not simply to foreground the possibility of different (and generally more equitable and sustainable) ways of acting and organising economically in the creative sectors, but to fundamentally question the salience of foregrounding the ‘economic’ as the primary concern of creative and cultural production at all. For many who work in the cultural or creative industries, while there is an economic need to make, distribute and consume various goods and resources, there is a simultaneous need and desire to do so in ways that contribute to the sense of a *life worth living* (Banks, 2018; O’Connor, 2018). In this way, the creative economy might be seen as a site for ‘growth’ of a different kind – as an investment in an expansion of sociability, collective togetherness and flourishing, and sets of moral and ethical values that might assume no subordinate status to economic growth and pursuit of the profit-motive. Exponents of such creative economies can be found in all locations, but – as we will now discuss – seem especially to arise in emergent circumstances of capitalist crisis.

### **Alternative Cultural Production in Argentina**

In order to think further about what ‘post-growth’ cultural production might look like, one that seeks to progressively and sustainably combine economic, social and ecological concerns, we turn to recent evidence and experiences from Argentina. Here, as in some other Latin American countries, there is currently a growing promotion of the creative economy on behalf of the state, which coexists with other ‘popular’ and alternative cultural economies. In this context, the paradigm of ‘post-growth’ or ‘degrowth’ as articulated and developed in the Global North is not widely circulated, but there are, however, other parallel paradigms, perspectives and praxes that cultural practitioners draw from which are compatible with post-growth and ecological thinking, such as *anti-extractivism*, *horizontalism*, and *buen vivir*. We have chosen Argentina as a suggestive setting for highlighting forms of cultural production that can help us think about a post-growth cultural economy, not least because of the recent socio-economic transformations the country has undergone, and the responses and strategies this has elicited from different social actors, including social movements and cultural producers. Following the economic crisis that began in the late 1990s, and the popular rebellion of 2001, Argentina offers a recent example of a context in which the neoliberal growth model has visibly failed, and its failure given place to new and alternative forms of

surviving, producing, sharing and living. In our exploration we draw from secondary data on cultural production in the early 2000s, as well as primary interview data from more recent cases<sup>3</sup>.

### *Recuperated businesses and the rise of cooperatives*

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Argentina underwent a profound economic crisis, a result of neoliberal policies in the 1990s that led to mass unemployment, the degradation of social services and a drastic increase in poverty levels (Sitrin 2006, p. 9). This generated widespread social unrest, the political mobilisation of both working and middle classes, and eventually, the toppling of five consecutive governments in just two weeks, to the chant of ‘¡Que se vayan todos!’ (Let them all leave), words that marked a deep desire for radical, systemic change. Faced with mass unemployment, Argentinians had to devise strategies of survival. This led to a range of formal and informal economic practices that changed not only the economic but also the social fabric; practices like bartering and structures such as cooperatives gave rise to new forms of relating to others, what became known as ‘horizontalism’ and ‘*autogestión*’. *Autogestión*, explains Sitrin, does not translate directly into English, but is closest to the anarchist concept of self-management. *Autogestión* is about ‘the relationships among people that create a particular project, not simply the project itself’. It refers to ‘an autonomous and collective practice’ that involves direct ‘democratic decision-making processes and the creation of new subjectivities along the way’. (Sitrin 2006: vii).

The recuperation of closed-down factories by their workers, and subsequent transformation of these into cooperatives, began with a dozen or so cases in 2001 and rose into the hundreds in the span of two years (Sitrin 2006: 14). These initiatives for survival, be that in the creative sector or elsewhere, emerged from a new understanding of the economy that deliberately moved away from individual forms of profit gaining towards more horizontal and equitable structures. Horizontal forms of working like cooperatives subscribed to a particular way of governing and democratically-thinking, but also to a different understanding of the economic, questioning the position of profit and growth as primary objectives.

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<sup>3</sup> The interview data we draw from in this chapter is part of a British Academy funded project ‘(Counter)Narratives of Neoextractivism in Argentina: Mapping Creative Resistance’, led by Paula Serafini.



An exemplary case of cooperative cultural production in the aftermath of the 2001 crisis is Eloísa Cartonera. Eloísa is a publishing project that emerged in Buenos Aires in 2003, and publishes hand-made books with cardboard covers. In their words, they are “a group of people who came together to work in a different way, to learn new things through work, to build up a cooperative, to learn how to subsist and manage ourselves, to work towards a common good”.<sup>4</sup> The project responded to the situation of the moment. As a result of mass unemployment, a new figure had emerged in the cities: the *cartonero*. *Cartonero* is the term used to describe people who collect material such as cardboard (*cartón*) and metal, and sell this to individuals or recycling companies. The founders of Eloísa, who were artists and writers themselves, began to buy the cardboard from the *cartoneros* at five times the usual rate and used it to make covers of books. They also began to work with groups of *cartoneros* who would gain training in hand-making books and paint the book covers (Zimmer 2014:105). The texts were donated either by famous authors or by young, unpublished ones. This non-profit publisher was established as a cooperative, at the beginning selling their productions as art books, and soon after shifting towards a model of affordable literature for all. This model travelled through the continent and now there are *cartonera* publishers all over Latin America.

*Cartonera* publishers can be read as agents of change on multiple levels. Firstly, they provide a source of income and, on occasion, training for a sector of the ‘informal’ creative economy. Secondly, they generate a new use for waste materials, contributing, albeit at a small scale, to the process of recycling in countries where often there is a lack of systematic recycling programmes (Bell 2017: 82) and increasing the value (both economic and aesthetic) of the waste material. Thirdly, by making their books publicly accessible, they contribute to a putative democratisation of literature. *Cartonera* publishing can be seen as the “realization of literature as a social movement [...] to intervene directly in urban life” (Zimmer 2014:105) Bell argues that this is an “instance of literary production in which the so-called ‘three pillars of sustainability’ – the environmental, the social and the economic – are invoked, intermeshed and transformed” (Bell 2017: 76-77). But, she adds, because of the way in which these aspects of the project are strongly interconnected, *cartonera* publishers challenge the idea of differentiated forms of sustainability ‘pillar’ by put forward a more integrated and dynamic vision of sustainability. Here, for example, we must consider how recycling is not

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<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.eloisacartonera.com.ar/ENGversion.html>

only an environmental issue but also a social and economic one. These practices must also be read in a contextualised manner, acknowledging the range of drivers behind what we could frame as ‘environmentalism of the poor’ (Martinez Alier 2002). Indeed, as Bell suggests, the form of sustainability put forward by these publishers stems from the struggle for survival. As such, while it is generative of sustainable processes, socialities and uses of waste, it still emerged from the perspective of the world as resource, a resource for the mere act of survival (Bell 2017: 94). Nonetheless, the *cartonera* movement could be said to be a fully ecologically-oriented creative economy in the sense that it takes a holistic and total view of the economic, social and environmental impacts of creative economy production, measured against an evaluation of the collective needs of producers and consumers. As such, it offers a suggestive way of rethinking what a ‘post-growth’ (or genuinely sustainable) creative economy might look like or aspire to be, both practically and philosophically.

### *Cultural production and alternatives to extractivism*

By way of further example, here we look at how horizontalism and *autogestión* in cultural production are further integrated with environmental and ecological concerns in the context of more recent cultural production linked to the movement against Argentinian ‘extractivism’. The extractivist model in Argentina shows its face in activities such as mega-mining, monocrop agriculture, deforestation, and the intensification of fossil fuel extraction. These have not only led to grave instances of environmental degradation, but also a series of health crises, the displacement of communities, the demise of regional economies and the increased repression of protests that seek to preserve common goods (Svampa and Viale 2014). The current stage of extractivism in Argentina, or what some call ‘neoextractivism’, can be traced back to the mid-1990s, with the growth of monocrop agriculture, and the development of legislation that prepped the way for transnational, large-scale, open-pit mining. The expansion of the extractive industries has continued throughout the following two decades, first under a series of progressive governments that directed income from extractive projects into state services and welfare programmes, and more recently under a more neoliberal government that is closely aligned to international capital and has implemented an austerity programme. As in the rest of Latin America, movements against extractivism in Argentina argue that societies need to move away from an extractive model altogether, work towards alternatives to development that safeguard human and non-human life, enhance democratic participation in decisions over the use of common goods that are

horizontal and inclusive, and reject conventional capitalist indicators of wellbeing, such as GDP and other measures of economic growth (Escobar 2014).

In the movement against extractivism, a critical and creative economy of community radio producers has emerged. This has been crucial to subsistence, information sharing and strengthening bonds and identities within the struggle (Serafini 2018 ?). An example of this is El Brote, a radio station based in an alternative community in Calamuchita, province of Córdoba, called Semilla del Sur, which promotes permaculture and bioconstruction. Córdoba is a province that has been heavily impacted by deforestation and by the use of toxic pesticides in monocrop agriculture. El Brote emerged three years ago as a form of community-centred, ‘popular’ and alternative radio station that is part of the ecology of the community of Semilla del Sur, but that through its programming, which addresses social, political and environmental issues, is also integral to the environmental, anti-extractivist movement at the local and regional level.

Carolina is a media practitioner, and one of the people behind El Brote. After visiting Calamuchita and getting involved with Semillas del Sur, she decided to leave the city and start a new life in this community. In an interview, she explained how the project for the radio station emerged:

We began to build the idea of a communications work cooperative, always thinking about other ways of relating to each other, other forms of work, of payment and other economies as well, with an understanding that we cannot have bosses and we cannot be bosses to others either, because this really conditions communication.

El Brote is an important element in the social and cultural life of Semilla del Sur. Neighbours have found a space of ‘social contention’ in the radio; the radio acts as a medium for them to share their stories and their perspectives on the world. Furthermore, as is often the case for community radios, El Brote offers training and upskilling for community members who take part in it, acknowledging how these skills can contribute to people’s future employment. The radio is both materially and culturally embedded within the alternative community of Semilla del Sur. It has a kind of social legitimacy that is territorial, that allows people to come to the radio when they are facing a particular issue, even if they are not regular participants. It is sustained through reciprocal relationships between those who run it and the audience, who

have various levels of involvement. The site where the radio is based, for instance, was collaboratively built by the community, following principles of bioconstruction. For the practitioners at El Brote, radio is part of a prefigurative project. In Carolina's words, "we believe that we really are generating and making possible another reality, always visibilising it from the field of communication".

El Brote sustains itself through a variety of channels designed to cover basic operational and economic needs. This includes a small degree of commercial activity, such as advertising spots for local businesses, and selling *yerba mate* (a local infusion) from a cooperative in the province of Misiones from within the radio studio. In addition, they have a series of agreements with other local cooperatives (e.g. in water and energy), which allow them to exchange advertisements for the provision of services. They also receive the support from neighbours, who have donated items like doors and windows for the renovation of the studio. Finally, El Brote is part of FARCO, the Argentine Forum of Community Radio. Through FARCO they have access to training opportunities and support with material issues, such as the opportunity to receive second-hand equipment from other radios, which they describe as a 'solidary bond' that is paramount to the subsistence of community media in Argentina.

The ethos, processes, and programming of El Brote, as well as its position in the wider ecology and economy of Semilla del Sur and the regional environmental movement, correspond with the principles of *autogestión* and horizontality discussed earlier, but also align with what we could call an anti-extractivist ethic of care, one that moves from a relationship of domination with regard to nature to one of care for both human and non-human beings (Curtin 1991). The radio acts as a space for personal transformation of participants, and for prefiguring social, cultural, economic and ecological relations that adhere to the notions of interdependence and ecodependence (Svampa 2015), and steer explicitly away from capitalist notions of profit and growth.

## **Conclusion**

In a finite world, where it is accepted that resources are depleting rapidly, and a series of potentially catastrophic ecological transformations apparently looming, then a narrow focus on accelerating and expanding economic 'growth' can only be self-defeating - not least because presumptions around the kinds of stable futures and guaranteed resource-

availabilities that will be sufficient to furnish the widely-anticipated expansion of production, are beginning to look very dubious indeed. The creative economy is not exempted from the ecological crisis – and is indeed partly culpable for its amplification and extension. We suggest that however desirable a commitment to unlimited creative economy expansion might appear, such a goal cannot be sustained indefinitely, either as ideal or practice.

By highlighting the cases of El Brote and the *cartoneras*, we aim simply to draw attention to the suggestive and inspirational aspects of these emergent ‘post-growth’ and ecologically-oriented forms of cultural and creative economy production. Such initiatives are of course small-scale, fragile and localised. And while these and similar activities are growing in Argentina (and in Latin America, and regions beyond) we are not suggesting that they will easily supplant dominant forms of creative economy organising and production, nor come to fully replace existing socio-economic arrangements – at least not yet. Rather we raise them as harbingers of something else – further evidence of the progressive raising of a more fulsome ecological consciousness amongst cultural producers and a hopeful sign of the kinds of new cultural praxes that might be occasioned in the face of expanding economic and ecological crises. What has happened in Argentina over two decades may be more likely to happen elsewhere as neoliberal regimes of growth further stall and the need to survive and sustain collective forms of life - in the creative economy and more generally – assumes a greater urgency and precedence. At the very least, this urgency might help put creative and cultural practitioners and producers more firmly at the forefront of necessary attempts to imagine more sustainable and just economic futures for all. For the future we might even invoke the hope that the creative economy may come to matter less as an ‘engine of growth’ and rather more for its capacity to provide a valued context and resource for evaluating the current order of *life* – including the role played by growth in sustaining or supressing it.

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