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Review:

The *Creative Citizen Unbound*, edit by Ian Hargreaves and John Hartley, is a collective volume that gathers distinct essays based on the results of the overarching research project *Creative Citizen*, which took place between 2011 and 2014 in various regions of the United Kingdom (Bristol, Birmingham, London, Wales) and was funded by the UK research Councils’ *Connected Communities* programme.

This is a volume that brings together two usually separated themes - creativity and citizenship. In doing so, it tackles a conceptually and empirically hybrid territory, which contributes to redefine the scope of both concepts and the empirical reality it designates. The meaning of *citizenship* is extended to practices usually thought outside its range, just as *creativity* includes a civic purpose usually not accounted for. And what citizen *unbound* is this? The use of the term appears somewhat provocative, suggesting however a central aspect: “the potentially transformative impact of creative citizenship, arising from its own civic commitment” (p.15), which appears to be at the heart of its emancipation.

The book’s subtitle - *how social media and DIY culture contribute to democracy, communities and the creative economy* - condenses the issues addressed throughout the volume: firstly, the focus on digital media and technologies as it relates transversally to the case studies examined; secondly, the emphasis on the agency of citizens, focused on multiple forms of participatory culture and citizenship,

including “ordinary” dynamics of creativity; finally, the contribution of these civic practices and the creative economy it generates to the communities’ development. Or, as it is expressed in the central research questions: “How does creative citizenship generate value for communities within a changing media landscape; how can this pursuit of value be intensified, propagated and sustained?” (p. 2).

One of the merits of this work rests on its multidisciplinary approach but also on the attempt to integrate different methodological perspectives and stakeholders. The diversity of actors involved in the research is obvious: researchers, activists, policy makers and ordinary citizens were one way or another integrated in distinct stages of the project.

This multiplicity encompasses different challenges or tensions, that may be summarized as following: a) concerning the theoretical perspectives raised by disciplinary differences – journalism, cultural studies, design, etc.; b) concerning forms of knowledge and experiences - more theoretical or academic *versus* more practical or focused on public intervention; c) concerning the nature of the discourses and practices it generates - openly scientific (even if with various disciplinary frameworks) *versus* more “normative”, oriented towards practice, social intervention and problem solving. The way all these tensions are matched or confronted in this volume is also one of its main virtues, but constitutes as well one of the difficulties in finding unique and consensual answers to the problems raised. How can we articulate the practices and views of artists and ordinary citizens with those of researchers and policy makers about citizenship and creativity?

The discussion about the boundaries between knowledges, practices, contexts, takes us out of the theoretical and methodological ‘comfort zone’ where we clearly know where scientific work ends and intervention begins. Here too lies one of the virtues of this volume: attempting to cope with the tensions (and potential blurring) between these different spheres and, at the same time, the difficulties of establishing clear and definite distinctions between them.

This issue brings us to the methodological and epistemological implications of the present endeavour. This is a project organized around *action research*, with an obvious practical nature. Team members’ have worked *with* and *for* the people who were part of each of the groups studied, following a *research ethos* of co-creation with the communities, methodologically more “fluid” and less interested in obeying the canons of “traditional” academic work (or, at least, positivistic approaches to it).

The volume is organized in eleven chapters. The first three have an introductory purpose, presenting the project's framework and major theoretical debates; the following seven examine, under different perspectives, specific aspects of the case studies at stake, each with a particular focus.

Chapter one, *Are you a creative citizen?*, contributes to the unity of the volume itself, offering an account of the history, objectives, methodology, framework, research questions and structure of the research project conducted. It constitutes a description as well as an invitation to the essays that follow, fulfilling in an informed and (self)critical manner that purpose.

Chapter two, *A problem of knowledge – solved?*, reviews different theoretical perspectives (from social sciences approaches to communication and media studies ones) noting the difficulty of economic theory in integrating citizenship in their own theories and, more so, the notion of creativity, with the resulting “problem of knowledge” of joining citizenship and creativity. An approach focused on creativity (including the cultural and DIY) is particularly relevant to the present volume, constituting its original contribution to the debate. To solve the theoretical tension created by distinct perspectives, the author proposes a “complex system” approach where everyone, everywhere contributes to the system.

Chapter three, *Citizenship in the creative economy*, also outlines the theoretical debate by discussing the notion of creative economy. The authors present an approach that goes beyond strictly economic dimension of creative economy, raising a debate concerning the borders between everyday acts of creativity and formal cultural and creative production. The contribution of both formal and informal activities to the development of individuals and communities is well documented in the case studies examined. Finally, it is proposed a model of creative ecosystem based on complexity theory that ambitiously attempts to link creative citizenship and creative economy.

Chapter four, *Citizenship, value and digital culture*, discusses the notion of value, by examining creative citizenship from the point of view of the creative value of local practices. This approach allows considering non-strictly economic forms of value that come from a vast array of creative citizenship practices. Furthermore, although prior to the emergence of digital networks, these practices' impact has been significantly enhanced by these technologies. The values behind the motivations

examined through the case studies point to a strong sense of personal improvement and self-actualization of participants.

Chapter five, *Varieties of creative citizenship*, examines a multiplicity of creative citizenship actions assuming a non-exhaustive or non-taxonomic purpose. Nevertheless, the conceptual review made is inclusive, as is the variety of empirical evidence provided by the case studies examined. *Context, practices* and *social capital* are three dimensions that interestingly guide us throughout the analysis. The findings provide an instructive account of the varieties of creative citizenship, once we expand this very notion to include not only individual acts of civic creativity but collective (and connective) ones as well.

Chapter six, *From networks to complexity: two case studies*, explores the case studies of South Blessed network, in Bristol, and hyperlocal news operation, in South Birmingham. The chapter examines the complex link between digital networks - as way of disseminating particular contents and addressing multiple audiences - and offline daily practices of creativity. The debate is partially focused on the discussion about different levels of analysis and how it may be articulated in a complex system approach. In this regard, the discussion around the civic potential of the internet is crucial, as online platforms and digital resources may be used both locally and across networks of civic participation.

Chapter seven, *Conversations about co-production*, offers a discussion around “co-production”, with both theoretical and methodological implications. Theoretically, it addresses the issue of engagement as result of collaborative work, adopting co-production as a more general term. Methodologically, it addresses the subject of collaborative methodologies, with implications in blurring distinctions between researcher/ participants, consumption/ production. The chapter summarizes the conversations held with five key participants in the project (The Mill, Wards Corner, Connect Cannock, South Blessed and Moseley Exchange) and critically assesses their views on their engagement, from which several insights are drawn.

Chapter eight, *Asset mapping and civic creativity*, focus on a methodology adopted transversally, allowing for comparison of results. Asset mapping is conceived both as research tool and instrument to support engagement and collaboration. The ambitious methodology envisaged involves identifying both tangible and intangible assets, the relationship between them, but also capturing stories and the rationale behind it and the way people are creatively engaged in this task (p. 186). The way

assets in their many forms were identified in the case studies examined, reveals the obvious potential of this tool.

Chapter nine, *Civic cultures and modalities of place making*, specifically discusses the importance of place-making for creative citizenship, considering both physical and online places. The definition of place presented is broad and devoted to the relation between place and media-making, following the aim of considering the role of communicative infrastructures for social relationships and civic agency. Three case studies connected to different places are reviewed (Wards Corner Community Coalition, London; hyperlocal news of Castel Vale, Birmingham; and South Blessed, Bristol) offering examples of diversified creative acts and interventions, both online and offline, and identity implications that go beyond the local contexts considered.

Chapter ten, *Technology and the creative citizen*, starts with a critical reflection on the way communication and media technologies are used to enhance civic creativity. It is argued that technology in itself does not entail creativity or civic behaviour, since the actual drivers of change are “motivated people” who use them in given circumstances. Against technological deterministic or linear perspectives, the authors claim that technology is developed in relation to individuals’ needs and the conditions of society, suggesting that a complex approach, based on a “media ecology as dynamic systems”, is required. What is then the role of such technologies for the “creative economy”? The case studies examined provide evidence of the affordances of using these technologies in various creative processes, which have been integrated with offline ones. The chapter ends with a collection of helpful recommendations for adopting tools adjusted to existing resources.

The last chapter, *A capacious approach to creative citizenship: implications for policy*, closes the book by reviewing the chapters and focusing on policy implications. It starts with the general argument about how “value” may be generated, intensified and sustained through creative citizenship. The overall conclusion points to the idea that we are now “living in a time of the creative citizen” (p. 261), but is it plausible to rely the creative economy on the creativity of the entire population? (p. 262). The answer to this question relies on the all-inclusive way the concept of creative citizenship (particularly creativity) is defined. The case studies and stories examined seem to confirm this notion. And “how do we make a move from creative citizenship constrained to the creative citizen unbound?” (p. 269). According to the authors, the answer lies on the way existing constraints may be eased or removed,

inviting communities' to use own tools to identify problems and find solutions, something that is discussed in the form of recommendations, including suggestions that imply challenges for framing policies.

Overall, the book provides a diversified, theoretically informed and well supported by evidence account, based on the results of a research project that explores ways of understanding the interplay between citizenship and creativity. This venture, however, didn't come without challenges. The most obvious of which arises from working directly *with* and, to some extent, *for* the people being studied, but also the efforts of combining contributions to the same project from apparently incompatible stakeholders, and how this translated into an array of methodological approaches, with obvious implications also for policy concerns.

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