



COMMENT



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# Culture as an objective for and a means of achieving a Wellbeing Economy

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The world faces multiple intersecting crises, several of which are existential. The current dominant economic design is at their root cause, leading to increased advocacy for alternative economic approaches, including Wellbeing Economy. However, the role of culture, both as an objective and as a means of achieving a Wellbeing Economy, is largely absent. In this article, we review how culture has been misunderstood as being dependent on the attainment of basic needs rather than an ever-present, vital, but undervalued attribute of all societies. We discuss how neoliberal economics has individualised and commodified culture, valuing it only as an engine of economic growth and tradeable capital, all of which has led to a substantial diminution and fraying of the social fabric which any positive social transformation will rely upon. Finally, we demonstrate why culture is an essential precondition for the creation of momentum for change through the conversations, shared understandings, new narratives, and communal spaces of all forms which cultural flourishing creates. We conclude by arguing that advocates for a Wellbeing Economy, and similar economic models, such as Doughnut Economics and Foundational Economies, should prioritise and embed support for cultural development as a non-commodified social asset if we are to adequately respond to current crises and navigate to a flourishing and habitable future for ourselves and our descendants.

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### Economic design as the root of current global crises

We live in a time of multiple, urgent and intersecting crises (e.g., Klein, 2019; McCartney et al., 2021): climate change; biodiversity loss; social and economic inequalities within and between countries; misinformation; authoritarianism; increasingly precarious work; and the degradation of culture into a commercialised and often technology-based experience (McCartney et al., 2021; The Geneva Charter for Well-being, 2021). Some of these changes represent existential threats: climate change and biodiversity loss could literally lead to human extinction. Others have led to poverty, immiseration, and a lack of human flourishing.

The neoliberal economic model, which has become increasingly dominant over the last 40 years, has accelerated these crises by depleting the resources upon which our societies are built, be they natural, social or psychological. Our economy and society depend upon the co-ordinated and timely interaction of many complex systems, including a stable climate and ecological bio-systems; global economic supply chains; and sufficient cultural cohesion to facilitate shared conversations and agreements. These long-established systems are breaking down.

Since the global financial crisis of 2008–10, criticism of the fundamental assumptions and institutions of neoliberalism, globalisation and capitalism at large has intensified. The idea that economic growth will ‘float all boats’ and that it will deliver prosperous, cohesive societies has been severely challenged. This has led to calls for an economic system that puts human wellbeing front and centre, that is, a new Wellbeing Economy model (Janoo et al., 2021; McCartney et al., 2021; The Geneva Charter for Well-being, 2021).

In a Wellbeing Economy, the needs of people and the planet are the focus of and motivation for economic activity, not the other way around (Janoo et al., 2021). However, the Wellbeing Economy is not a prescription detailing the ways in which economies should be redesigned. Instead, it is deliberately and explicitly non-prescriptive in recognition of the need for genuine participatory democratic processes to determine the economic design and priorities for each population (Hill O’Connor et al., 2023, n.d.; Janoo et al., 2021). This democratic repurposing necessarily requires space and methods for public discourse on questions around what it is that makes a good life and how best to live within planetary boundaries. We argue that the cultural realm is the space for this, and yet the ability to engage in this way has been drastically diminished by 40 years of neoliberal governments in many high-income countries.

Neoliberalism arose as the result of an elite movement sparked by the Mont Pelerin Society in the 1940s and gained a foothold following the currency and oil shocks of the 1970s and the associated inflation and slower economic growth. Its proponents sought to preserve private property, particularly capital, and the competitive market in the face of democratic expansion and the growing legitimacy of government power to act on behalf of the majority and the common good (MacLean, 2017). In today’s capitalist economy, the needs of capital are the focus, and these needs necessarily pre-empt any democratic discourse about the design of an economic system that would prioritise human and natural wellbeing.

A Wellbeing Economy, in contrast, would be defined by its democratic principles, social institutions, reciprocal obligations, and common purpose (Janoo et al., 2021). These rich networks of cooperative responsibility, membership and meaning would provide both the objective for and the very foundation of culture. At a moment when system change has become a matter of human survival, such political debilitation needs to be reversed. Crucial for such reversal is the role of culture as the realm in which the collective conversation about our future wellbeing can take place. Yet culture is currently absent from these debates.

In this paper, we argue that the omission of a vibrant and flourishing culture both as a means to achieve and as the embodiment of a Wellbeing Economy is a mistake, but one which can be resolved and incorporated. This critique also applies to other conceptualisations of new economic models that share with the Wellbeing Economy a concern with the need for system change to better address human and ecological wellbeing of which the most popular are doughnut economics (Raworth, 2018), foundational economics (Calafati et al., 2023), economy for the common good (Felber, 2015), degrowth economics (Hickel, 2021) and mission economy (Mazzucato, 2019).

### Culture as an objective for a Wellbeing Economy

Since the middle of the 19th century, ‘culture’ has been viewed in two broad ways. Edward Tylor’s 1871 book *Primitive Culture* defined culture in an anthropological fashion as: “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Burnett Tylor, 2012). Two years later, Mathew Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy* defined culture as “a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world” (Arnold, 1869). That is, those specific products of culture that we used to call arts and letters.

This identification of a specific space of ‘culture’ distinct from the economy (or politics, the social, law and administration) is itself a product of capitalist modernity, as more traditional societies rarely had a distinct word for culture. In the 20th century, this bifurcation between art and folk, civilised and primitive (or ‘popular’), gave way to ‘mass culture’.

“Culture was itself an economic realm, encompassing the mass media, advertising, and the production and distribution of knowledge. Moreover, it came to signify not only the cultural industries and state cultural apparatuses but the forms of working-class subsistence and consumption, both the goods and services supplied by the welfare state or purchased on the market, and the time of leisure and social reproduction outside the working day” (Denning, 2004, p. 80).

However, culture was located within a ‘mixed economy’, regulated in various (often contradictory) terms of nation-building and state interests, but mostly as part of the educational, welfare and leisure aspects of social citizenship associated with the Fordist-Keynesian system.

Since the 1980s, culture as part of a wider social citizenship was replaced by the notion of culture as a leisure economy, driven by the discretionary purchases of individual sovereign consumers. Public funding for culture lost a key aspect of its policy legitimacy and was required to show value for money. New Public Management applied market efficiencies to the public sector, with quasi-price signals and quasi-contracts between the service provided and the individual ‘customer’. Publicly funded culture was forced to generate a range of economic, social and (increasingly) health metrics in order to receive funding. At the same time, the communications and media system became both deregulated and globalised, with convergent technology (telecommunications and ‘content industries’) and the new “Internet” given over almost entirely to the private sector (Srncic, 2016; Zuboff, 2019; Coul-dry and Mejias, 2019; Gilbert and Williams, 2022).

In the 1990s, new ‘third way’ social democratic parties who had broadly accepted the tenets of neoliberalism sought to promote a less harsh and more inclusive economy by creating new pathways to employment. The welfare state was a safety net only, as the ability to get a job was deemed the central prerequisite to access

health, education and other social services as part of ‘market citizenship’. The old working class would re-educate themselves and their sons and daughters go to university, for as Bill Clinton had it, “you gotta learn to earn”. They promoted the idea of an educational meritocracy, and central to this was the idea of the knowledge economy. Out of this came the ‘creative industries’, invented by New Labour in 1998 (DCMS, 1998). The creative industries redefined culture as an industrial sector and creativity as a crucial input into production (Hesmondhalgh and Pratt, 2005; Florida, 2002; O’Connor, 2024).

If the early ‘hard’ neoliberalism of Thatcher and Reagan demanded culture justify themselves economically, the ‘soft’ neoliberalism of Clinton, Blair, Keating, Schröder and others saw culture as a crucial component of the ‘new’ knowledge economy. It is this annexation of culture to the economy that has been the main legacy of the creative industries (Hewison, 2014; Hesmondhalgh, 2019; O’Connor, 2024).

This has had four consequences. First, an attempted reduction of a fundamental aspect of human social life—culture—to an economy, even an ‘industry’, with a shoehorning of human creativity into productive, commercial innovation. Second, a drastic reduction in public funding for culture, part of a general policy of austerity since 2010 but especially pointed in culture, made even worse during the pandemic. Third, a failure to deal with the real challenges facing those who work in the cultural sector (public, private and not-for-profit) whose working conditions, job security, remuneration and sense of self-worth have been steadily eroded. Whilst there are some well-paid workers, these jobs are few and far between, as the core-and-peripheral model of industrial organisation has been applied to them. Richard Florida claimed the ‘creative class’ would inherit the future because they owned the means of production, which was “inside their heads” (Florida, 2002, p. 37). But the celebration of the talented, creative individual ignored the ways in which they have been systematically separated from intellectual property rights, which are now owned and robustly enforced by an ever-narrower group of ‘legacy’ and ‘platform’ corporations (Giblin and Doctorow, 2022; Vallas and Schor, 2020).

This leads to the fourth point, which is how the creative sector, celebrated as small and micro-enterprises, start-ups, independents, grassroots, ‘tee-shirts’ as opposed to ‘suits’, is, in fact, dominated by a few huge monopolies which have complete control of production and distribution. In short, over 40 years, we have given over control of much of our culture to a few global corporations, whose digital tentacles penetrate our everyday lives in ways unimaginable in the 1980s and whose control over a radically new public media sphere has been almost complete (Giblin and Doctorow, 2022).

In contrast, a transition to a Wellbeing Economy could foster a cultural renewal. By prioritising social and ecological needs in the design of the economy, the causes of the cultural attack listed above could be stopped. Making the eradication of poverty a priority could enable everyone to participate fully in society and all its cultural forms. Culture could stop being seen as an economic sector required to ‘pay its way’ in terms of economic growth. Instead, it could flourish in a mixed economy of public sector-provided goods, third-sector and informal organisations (facilitated by a shorter working week and a reprioritisation of time and energy towards that which ‘makes life worth living’), and firms with plural ownership structures (Tod et al., 2022) responding to the evolving cultural needs of communities. Indeed, by moving from the current system of private luxury and public scarcity to one of public luxury and private sufficiency, cultural participation could become a defining social experience (Monbiot, 2018; Ross, 2016). Finally, a Wellbeing Economy could address the inequalities in economic wealth and ownership and

the under-regulation of domestic and international markets in any economic redesign, thereby eradicating the profiteering by global technology firms from hate, misogyny and the selling of society’s attention.

Despite the obvious attractions of a culturally vibrant future, culture as public policy rarely features in the literature on heterodox economics (Banks and Oakley, 2020). For example, it does not feature in Raworth’s ‘doughnut’ (Raworth, 2018), nor is it prominent in the literature promoting a Wellbeing Economy (Janoo et al., 2021; The Geneva Charter for Well-being, 2021). Advocates for a Foundational Economy also make no reference to culture in key documents (including the 2020 manifesto: <https://foundationaleconomy.com/covid-19-report/>). They focus on collective goods and services deemed ‘essential’ or ‘basic’ but make no reference to those essential parts of life that allow us to flourish as cultural and creative social beings. We argue here that if we define the Wellbeing Economy (or similar heterodox approaches) as purely concerned with the material reproduction of life, we are already restricting our vision of social transformation. By making cultural flourishing part of the Wellbeing Economy vision, it has much greater potential to excite and engage societies in a movement towards a better future (Jackson, 2021). Furthermore, as we will go on to argue, neglect of culture limits our ability to mobilise the energies required to achieve change.

### Culture as a means of achieving a Wellbeing Economy

Culture’s reframing as a consumer economy was linked to a schema of historical evolution in which we move from agriculture to industry to services and thence to “experiences”, in which creativity is at a premium (e.g., Pine and Gilmore, 1999). Drawing on simplified versions of Maslow’s ‘hierarchy of needs’ (Maslow, 1943), this became a schema to describe a historical move from a ‘material’ to a ‘post-material’ economy. As mass production gave way to customised, niche products in which emotional, symbolic, and aesthetic elements were central to their appeal, creative industries moved from being a marginal, artisanal throw-back to the cutting edge of a new culturalised economy (Lash and Urry, 1994). This gave rise to the sense that cultural goods were post-materialist, aspirational or luxury goods sought after the material basics had been acquired. This could explain why many heterodox economists either see cultural consumption as part of the problem (Jackson, 2021) or simply discretionary spending (O’Connor, 2022).

Contrary to this post-materialist schema, we argue that basic material provision is crucial to any flourishing life, without which nobody is truly free. Indeed, lives of crippling poverty are not conducive to participation in the creative arts. This seems like common sense, but the ‘hierarchy of needs’ is saying something else. Not just that a range of basic needs and social arrangements are needed for a full human flourishing but that it is only after these basic needs are met that people can begin to think about ‘self-actualisation’ and art and culture.

This claim—food and shelter first, culture later—involves an index of progress. Only as history progresses and material civilisation improves can society participate in culture. However, locating culture only after basic material needs are met is anthropologically wrong (Graeber and Wengrow, 2022). Throughout history, as in this present age, lives have been hampered by poverty and grinding labour, but it is not the case that these lives do not seek meaning or latch onto symbols, words, rhythms and melodies which articulate this meaning.

Rather than being a universal truth, it is only our own modern civilisation that thinks culture can only happen after the ‘essentials’ have been met that views it as “decorative rather than structural” (Fleming, 2016). When Indigenous peoples talk about

culture, it is of something foundational to their lives. This has been the case historically for most societies and civilisations. Only in the 18th century did a space called ‘economy’ or the ‘sphere of needs’ get separated into an autonomous system not amenable to morals and meaning. It is this idea of the amoral ‘modern economy’, imposed by colonial gunboats, that non-western societies found so existentially shocking (O’Connor and Gu, 2020).

In Europe, the idea of art and culture was one important source of opposition (there were others) to the economic and instrumental logic that came to define our lives in society. That, in the 1980s and 1990s, this very ‘anti-materialist’ objection becomes a way to position culture as a foundation for a post-industrial economy, is as much part of the neoliberal revolution as new public management or reducing the welfare budget (O’Connor, 2024).

### Seeking the future

In discussing why culture did not become a Sustainable Development Goal (SDG), eminent cultural economist David Throsby suggested it was because the goals were conceived in purely quantitative economic and social terms. Because of this language, Throsby suggests, the SDGs were unable to decide on how to measure intergenerational equity; what we owe to future generations. Intergenerational equity is the very heart of Brundtland’s definition of sustainability (*Our Common Future: report of the World Commission on Environment and Development*, 1987). Economics can only pose this as “an efficiency question, one of determining optimal strategies for intertemporal resource allocation”. As it can only be framed as a “moral or ethical issue, dependent on people’s subjective value beyond the reach of a strictly defined economic calculus”, it lies beyond their calculus (Throsby, 2017, p. 138).

Economics, as Robinson (2020) suggested, simply cannot deal with the future. But culture can. One of the most fundamental and universal definitions of culture is of an enduring bond between past and future generations. Anglo-Irish conservative philosopher Edmund Burke (1790) famously described society as “a contract... between those who are dead, those who are living, and those who are to be born”. The inability of neoclassical and neoliberal forms of economic reasoning to measure, and thus value, this intergenerational connection is one of the contributory reasons for the multiple worldwide systems stress that we now face (e.g., in relation to intergenerational cost-shifting and climate change (Keen, 2021)).

Culture is able to articulate the connection between and responsibility for the past and the future. In so doing, it also breaks with *homo economicus* and the calculative rationality that neoclassical and neoliberal economics have moved to the very centre of our polity. Retrieving the specific mode of being in the world that culture represents and asserting its key role in helping us meet our present challenges is of vital importance. This is of a part with culture’s association with the imagination, both individual and collective, and with forms of narrative and envisioning which allow us to think about past, present and future in a more holistic manner. A recurrent critique of the SDGs is their fragmentation into endless metrics, Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and tables, all of which rarely add up to a coherent knowledge and understanding. One contribution of the cultural sector is to help facilitate this form of synthetic knowledge about the world. The marginalisation of culture as embodied knowledge, its reduction to ‘creativity’ as input, and its designation as an industrial sector, has deeply wounded not just the sector but also the wider ability of public policy to imagine the future.

Fleming (2016) argues that culture “...recruits the intelligence and purpose of the people in the extraordinary task of inventing a future” (p.3). Given the urgent need to invent such a future in the

face of current crises (McCartney et al., 2021) and the need to divine that future through participatory and democratic processes (Janoo et al., 2021), fostering our cultural spaces *now*, as a *means* of making a successful transition, is essential.

As Professor Hans Mommaas, Director of The Netherlands’s Environmental Assessment Agency, suggested at a recent conference<sup>1</sup>:

“In the midst of the various problem agendas... there is no clear place or storyline any longer for the role of culture - in the sense of creating and celebrating collective forms of imagination, communication, perspectives... [We] must have a rich cultural sphere in itself... for culture to be instrumental to these other agendas... So why not start with redeveloping the storyline that in the midst of the crises we find ourselves in, we urgently need a revival of a cultural sphere and that the current lack of this has been a big mistake... because it is producing [a] distrust in the future and [a] lack of collective imagination”.

### Conclusion

We therefore argue that cultural flourishing should not simply or exclusively be seen as an outcome for a Wellbeing Economy, put off until other needs are met (such as housing, food, warmth, etc.), not least because culture *is what makes lives worth living* and it therefore merits equal consideration to other outcomes. However, we also argue that a transition to a Wellbeing Economy is likely to require a flourishing culture. A Wellbeing Economy is not a small change for high-income countries today, it represents a radical and fundamental reorientation of the purpose, nature and design of the economy. Although for many people, the need and the attraction of this is obvious, for many others, it will be an alien concept. Fostering and developing societal conversations, reflection, and common desires is a large part of what cultural flourishing can deliver. Where culture diminishes and individualises, there can be no common grounds for change, leaving people as mere individual consumers without agency or vision.

### Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this research as no data were generated or analysed.

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### Note

1 ‘Wellbeing Economy meets Critical Imagination’. Avan University, Breda, 27–28th September 2021.

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### Author contributions

The manuscript was drafted by GM, JO and SO after discussions amongst all authors. All authors provided critical input to editing the manuscript and approved the final version.

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The authors declare no competing interests.

### Ethical approval

No ethical approval was sought or required for this study.

### Informed consent

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

### Additional information

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