The articulation of ‘culture’ and ‘economy’, it should not be forgotten, was foundational to the discipline of cultural studies [...] Culture seems increasingly to work as a force of production and a vector of circulation, a form of value that circulates with all the liquidity of money, both everywhere and nowhere. This perhaps accounts for the evanescence of the terms in recent theory, where it appears as simultaneously all-powerful and elusive, relentlessly productive yet prone to constant failure and breakdown (Cooper and McFall 2017: 2).

It does seem necessary to do some genealogical and archaeological work on the archive (Hall 1992: 277).

Context

The Workshop on Cultural Economy took place at the turn of the millennium, at the Open University’s Walton Hall in Milton Keynes, hosted by the Pavis Centre for Social and Cultural Research. Here, a small group representing sympathetic but divergent social science subdisciplines each brought a ‘cultural’ eye to the changing status and social character of economic logics. The event produced an edited volume, Cultural Economy: Cultural Analysis and Commercial Life (Du Gay and Pryke 2002); within ten years, via a range of publications and collaborative projects, it had evolved into an increasingly robust, if still nascent, field of study (Bennett et al. 2008). As editors and contributors (Cooper and McFall 2017; Entwistle and Slater 2014; Richardson 2019; Umney et al. 2017), as much as critics (Gregory 2014; Toscano 2016), have recently been at pains to note, despite considerable and microscopic attention to the making up of the ‘economic’ and the ‘social’, the specific pertinence of the ‘cultural’ and, yet more urgently, the ‘political’ (particularly issues of representation and resistance) remain difficult to articulate within the Cultural Economy project. This despite the centrality of the latter terms to practitioners of cultural studies, who enjoyed a foundational presence in its early construction.

On the occasion of its twentieth anniversary, therefore, we reconvene the Workshop: revisiting the conditions of its emergence; provoking consideration on its legacies and possible futures. Returning to this moment in a spirit both genealogical and renovative, we encourage original participants and those who engaged with later conceptual and institutional developments (sympathetic co-conspirators and passionate critics alike) to present their own evaluations of the (ongoing) ‘making up’ of the Cultural Economy moment.

Themes

We are interested, first, to revisit the event of the workshop itself amid the institutional context from which it emerged: the distinct but changing intellectual structures and practices of the Open University; the professional and geographical trajectories of participants and ideas, including lineages of pedagogy/apprenticeship, disciplinarity and ‘knowledge exchange’, alongside the matter of representation, participation and identity; the shifts in research culture, funding environment, professionalisation and broader political caprices of British academia; the proliferation of sites and spaces through which Cultural Economy spread; and so on.

Second, we want also to return to arguments originally advanced under the name of Cultural Economy: to the empirical subjects – service work, management culture, ‘creative industries’, financialisation – that were spurring reflection at that time, and which seemed to call so urgently for new conceptual architectures; to the debates into which this approach was intervening and apart from which it set itself; to the lacunae and the weaknesses that subsequently became apparent; and of course the accusations and critiques to which it was subject, at the time and since.

Finally, we wish to launch such reflections with the awareness that, at the present moment, the entwinement of culture and economy proceed with intensified urgency and uncertainty – the nature of which we leave to contributors to define.
Original workshop organisers, participants, and affiliates are invited to:

- reflect on the creation, maintenance and termination of institutional spaces pertinent to the cultural economy moment, such as: the OU Pavis Centre for Social and Cultural Research, the Centre for Research on Economic and Sociocultural Change, the role of Publishers (Sage/Taylor & Francis), Journal of Cultural Economy, etc.
- elaborate on the articulation between Cultural Economy as a theoretical project and the OU teaching environment as laboratory – including collaborative curriculum design and delivery; the implications of new technologies in knowledge communication and distance learning; and particularly the production of relevant student textbooks and readers – in courses such as: Popular Culture (1982–1987); Restructuring Britain (1989–1998); Culture, Media and Identities (1997–2007); Making Social Worlds (2008–2021); among others.
- shine light on the less visible moments in the original Cultural Economy workshop, both intellectual and institutional– such as the contributions not included in Du Gay and Pryke (2002); and particularly the work of organisation, editorship, administration and professional support services.
- share any artefacts (such as images, paperwork or lecture notes) and memories that may still exist.
- reassess and reimage their own individual contributions to the workshop, in particular to clarify particular conceptual innovations and genealogies that have become muddled over time, or aspects of the changing world that have been overlooked.

All (including students, fellow travellers and critics of cultural economy) are invited to:

- revisit the origination and development of the cultural economy approach, including their own involvement and contributions, however ‘minor’ or background, alongside more decisive interventions.
- trace the social life of particular concepts, categories, theories or methods, as well as persons and identities, that have moved into, through and beyond the cultural economy project, considering various technologies or devices of knowledge translation and popular diffusion, within and beyond the academy.
- situate the project in its broader contexts of governance, across HEIs, funders, nations, governments, etc.
- offer their perspective on the gains that have been made, as well as any missed opportunities, for their own field through the work of the original Cultural Economy Workshop/2002 edited volume/Journal (in particular) and approach (in general).
- evaluate the distinctiveness of cultural economy in this context, with respect to comparative intellectual projects in social science ‘after the cultural turn’, such as (critical) cultural political economy, actor-network theory, science and technology studies, cultural industries studies, as well as the fate of ‘cultural studies’ itself, and the far broader field of economic anthropologies and heterodoxies.
- articulate present-day empirical challenges to which Cultural Economy must, of necessity, respond – perhaps especially those at the vexed nexus of ‘culture’ and ‘politics’.

The anniversary workshop will seek to assemble a range of reflections on and critical responses to that moment. Extended arguments as well as shorter provocation pieces are equally welcome. Those who cannot attend are encouraged to contribute to the dialogue through blogposts to be published on the JCE website. A selection of contributions to the workshop are intended to be compiled for a future issue of Journal of Cultural Economy.

A limited number of travel grants are available for PhD students or those without access to appropriate institutional resources (courtesy the Journal of Cultural Economy, and sociology departments of the University of Edinburgh and City, University of London).

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References


