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## THE\_CHALLENGE

### **Learning to look**

Being creative isn't easy. It cannot be taught, although it can be learned. Everyone has to learn the rules before they can break them. The best way to learn is to work with people who are better, wiser, than oneself, with people who are challenging and have the knack of picking the right challenges. With some activities, you want other people to be less talented or successful so you can get ahead; in the creative ecology, you want to work with people who are better than you so you can get ahead.

Read this letter from a 21-year-old man who was living in London in 1874 and working as a junior assistant in an art gallery. It was the end of a cold January day. He had finished the stocktaking and had enlivened a tedious job by looking hard at the pictures:

Admire as much as you can; most people don't admire enough. The following are some of the painters whom I like especially: Scheffer, Delaroche, Hébert, Hamon, Leys, Tissot, Lagye, Boughton, Millais, Thijs Maris, De Groux, De Braekeleer Jr, Millet, Jules Breton, Feyen-Perrin, Eugene Feyen, Brion, Jundt, George Saal, Israëls, Anker, Knaus, Vautier, Jourdan, Compte-Calix, Rochussen, Meissonier, Madrazo, Ziem, Boudin, Gérôme, Fromentin, Decamps, Bonington, Diaz, Th Rousseau, Troyon, Dupré, Corot, Paul Huët, Jacque, Otto Weber, Daubigny, Bernier, Emile Breton, Chenu . . .<sup>1</sup>

Few people today could name so many painters. Was he exaggerating? I do not think so.

He had thought of being a commercial illustrator but doubted he could draw. His brother was keen, but his sister advised, 'Be a baker, that's a useful trade'. He started to copy other paintings and to illustrate his letters.

Nearly ten years later, thinking back on his decision to paint, he wrote to his brother:

At the time when you spoke of my becoming a painter, I thought it very impractical and would not hear of it. What made me stop doubting was reading a clear book on perspective, Cassange's 'Guide to the ABC of Drawing', and a week later I drew the interior of the kitchen with stove, chair, table and window – in their places and on their right legs.<sup>2</sup>

All his life he roamed around Europe, living off family and friends, searching for the right place to work. He dreamed of a community of artists and, after many anxious letters, at last persuaded Paul Gauguin, an older and more successful painter,

to stay in his little house in Arles. Their world consisted of the house, the countryside where they painted, the grocery, several bars and a brothel. They gave each other confidence – ‘Look, here’s someone else as crazy as I am’ – practical advice, and a glimpse of a perfect life together.

Vincent van Gogh’s nine weeks with Gauguin in his studio were astonishingly creative for both of them. Van Gogh produced forty-nine oil paintings, several watercolours and hundreds of drawings and Gauguin about one-third as many. The Yellow House with its yellow furniture was an oasis for two nomads. It didn’t last, but it was extraordinary while it did. By December, Van Gogh had started his voyage into madness and Gauguin returned to Paris and then to Martinique where he painted, at the end of his life, a canvas titled *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*.

The buzz of hard work done well is exhilarating for those doing it and also for those who (are allowed to) watch. It is best when someone takes risks, and lets you see why and how. There is no better preparation or talisman for one’s own journey. Like all creative activities, art is dependent upon novelty, but we only recognise novelty if we know what everyone else has already done, as Van Gogh appreciated on that dark January day in London. This is why creative people want to immerse themselves in other people’s excitement and passions; to share their failures and successes; to get close.

### Definitions

To begin, we need to differentiate between *creativity* and *creative economy*. *Creativity* is the use of ideas to produce new ideas. The input, the original idea, may be novel or familiar.

What is more important is that we use energy to transform it into novel outcomes. The output's commercial value may depend on its *uniqueness* (as with Van Gogh's paintings) or on how easily it can be *copied* (as with this book).

Creativity is a neuro-physical process that comes with a mix of emotions that add greatly to the pleasure, the kick, of thinking for oneself. It can be described but not defined and indeed has always been conditional. Ancient religions ascribe creativity to God and attribute Creation to a single Creator. In Europe up to the seventeenth century a Christian who claimed to be the sole source of his or her own ideas was regarded as blasphemous. Historically, Christians believed that God created the world (surveys indicate that about one-third of Americans still believe this). Islam describes Allah as the Creator and forbids representations of Allah or the Prophet.

Secular societies are no better guarantors of freedom and many regard independent thought with suspicion. In the fifth century BC, Plato lived his life on the basis of thinking for himself, but he banned artists from Utopia because he believed they would be disruptive. He was right. Today, totalitarian societies feel uncomfortable with free speech and forbid it. Every society, even the freest, places restrictions on what people can say and write and represent in images.

This raw creativity is not the same as talent, which is a kind of expertise, usually learned and repeatable. Nor is it the same as art, a tricky word, which refers both to particular kinds of expression and formats and to something done well. The argument rages whether there are any absolute standards in art (or beauty) or whether they are eternally relative. Since

many brilliant minds have failed to resolve the dispute, the latter case is more likely to be true.<sup>3</sup>

Creativity is not the same as *innovation*. Creativity is internal, personal and subjective, whereas innovation is external and objective. Creativity often leads to innovation, but innovation seldom leads to creativity. Each creative domain tends to one or the other. Where success depends on personal expression, people want to be creative; if it depends on calculation and implementation they aim for innovation. Art for art's sake is fine, and has produced great work, but 'innovation for innovation's sake' is a waste of money.

*Economy* initially referred to the efficient management of a household or farm and then to the complex of human activities involved in production, spending, consumption and saving. Its base is the tension between what we want and what we can get, whether by producing our own goods and services or by buying someone else's. The economic conundrum presented by John Stuart Mill has been that, whereas our desires, wants and needs are infinite or at least indefinitely large, our resources are limited. We therefore have to make choices that affect our wealth and welfare, the market, and our future desires.

The way economics and business has approached this for the past fifty years has been to focus on one-off innovation implemented in mass production with ever lower costs and prices. Business has seen creativity and innovation as specialist functions. I call this the *repetitive economy*. We are now seeing a shift to the *creative economy* where, although basic goods and services have not diminished in absolute terms, the bulk of growth comes from their added symbolic value. Like

other economic systems, the function of a creative economy is to use resources so as to increase wealth and welfare. But, while the commodities and manufactured goods in a classical economy are physical and quantifiable, the inputs and outputs of a creative economy are subjective and qualitative. The value of a commodity like a potato is its physical importance as food; and one potato is much like another. But the value of what I create is what it means to me and, possibly, what it means to others; and meanings are unstable.

*Ecology* is the study of relationships between organisms and their environment, which probably includes other organisms. An *eco-system* is an ecology of several different species living together. Scientists talk of *habitats*, which are real places like streams and urban environments, and also of *niches*, which are systems wherein a species thrives. Early ecologists worked in wild places, but nowadays they look more at managed eco-systems and niches. Cultivated eco-systems are the best model for human ecologies. Eco-literate models do not just 'let nature go', leaving it wild, nor are they exclusively centred on human interventions. They 'involve taking nature as its base and working with it to achieve your aims'.<sup>4</sup> *Deep ecology* eschews a human bias and takes nature's viewpoint.

A *creative ecology* is a niche where diverse individuals express themselves in a systemic and adaptive way, using ideas to produce new ideas; and where others support this endeavour even if they don't understand it. These energy-expressive relationships are found in both physical places and intangible communities; it is the relationships and actions that count, not the infrastructure. The strength of a creative ecology can be measured by these flows of energy and the continual learning

and creation of meaning. The quartet of diversity, change, learning and adaptation mutually enhance each other.

I often refer to *self-organising systems*, which can be defined as systems whose internal dynamics lead to increases in complexity and stability without external guidance, and to *emergent* behaviour which is observed when a system, rather than its parts, causes a new pattern. Both terms originated in physics, but they exist in biology, in the ways birds flock together and bees swarm, in ecology, with deep ecology and the Gaia theory, and in sociology, with memes, of which more later.

### **The origins of an idea**

There have been peaks of extraordinary thinking and inventiveness throughout human history, often linked to trade and empires. With hindsight, we can see that the peaks tend to be brief. Cultures emerge to provide a high-energy nutrient for creative achievement but seldom sustain it: Mesopotamia and Sumeria (the Fertile Crescent), Classical Greece, China in the Han Dynasty and later as well as today, Italy during the Roman Empire and again during the Renaissance in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Arab science and civilisation in the ninth to eleventh centuries, and so on. It is invidious to make a list because so many cultures have flourished in ways we scarcely appreciate.

The origins of Western creativity can be traced back to the Renaissance of Greek and Roman classical ideas and to the birth of humanism. Europe has been astonishingly creative in philosophy, art and industry, flowering in culture continuously since the fifteenth century and in technology since the

eighteenth. The Enlightenment upheld the claims of reason over doctrine (and sometimes of personal passion as a motor of reason) and provided an environment for independent expression, debate, the rule of law, the freedom of the press, accountable government, and independent public institutions. Although some believed it would lead to the death of religion, it did not do so, as Darwin discovered when he presented his ideas on the 'origin of species' in the 1860s.

The capital cities of London, Paris, Amsterdam, Rome, Berlin, Prague, Vienna and Moscow were world centres of creativity, invention and novelty (I call them *mini-ecologies*). New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and other American cities soon joined them. Some American scientists believe that the ecology of the Native American could not have developed civilisation and industry on its own and needed an injection of northern European values.<sup>5</sup> Once injected, and given the immigrants' commitment to freedom and entrepreneurship, America developed quickly to take a lead.

The first few decades of the twentieth century saw astonishing artistic, scientific and technological outbursts. Freud published his *Interpretation of Dreams* in 1900, Einstein published his theory of relativity five years later, and by the 1920s scientists realised that the Cartesian and Newtonian assumptions that matter consists of hard-edged things that could be objectified had been replaced with patterns of probabilities. These decades saw a tectonic shift in our handling of ideas, summed up in the new theories of quantum physics, from the old world view based on reductionism, mechanics and fixed quantities to a view based on holistic systems where qualities were contingent on the observer and on each other.

Originating in physics, these new perceptions had profound effects on all science and art and indeed on how people treat ideas and facts, certainties and uncertainties. We can trace modern creativity as a mass movement back to quantum physics and its implications for uncertainty, contingency and interdependence.

The Lumière brothers had invented cinematography in 1896 and Picasso remade painting in his *Demoiselles D'Avignon* in 1907, followed by his experiments with African tribal art and cubism. Marcel Duchamp, who like Picasso was influenced by the French mathematician Henri Poincaré, painted his *Nude Descending a Staircase* in 1912 and exhibited his even more controversial *Urinal* in New York in 1917. James Joyce wrote *Finnegan's Wake*, incidentally referring to Einstein as Winestain, and then 1922 saw both Joyce's *Ulysses* and T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Nijinsky invented a new choreography. The premiere of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* in 1913 caused a riot in Paris, only for Arnold Schoenberg to revolutionise music again a few years later with his *Pierrot Ensemble*. Marconi was developing radio and Louis Bleriot flew across the English Channel. The Dutch de Stijl, the German Bauhaus and the Russian School of Art and Design launched modern design and constructivism. It was the time of cabaret, cocktails, the Jazz Age, cinema and Dada. Technological innovation proliferated: safety razors, the latex condom, vacuum cleaners, air-conditioning, neon lights, windscreen wipers, bakelite, cellophane, instant coffee, stainless steel, the bra, the zip, pop-up toasters and frozen food.

### **The American dream machine**

America was the first country in modern times to conjoin the arts and business and so practically invent popular culture, the notion that artists, the people and big business could speak the same language and enjoy the same pleasures. This is why, although the French invented cinematography, the Americans invented the movie business. It is evident in the work of Norman Rockwell, Walt Disney and Motown Records and most notably the internet. While many in Europe were shoring up ideological barriers between art and commerce, America found great delight in bundling them together and making money out of the cocktail. It is famous for its historic cultural and political freedoms, enshrined in the Constitution, and its robust competitiveness. It has been criticised for being too commercial, though these comments have been muted recently, and it was home to some of the most imaginative twentieth-century art, fiction, poetry, film, TV, music, fashion and architecture and has a rare ability to make designs and tell stories that appeal worldwide. Its social networks produce an extraordinary variety of emergent thinking.

Throughout the century, America, Europe and later Japan embarked on a spree of discovery, invention and innovation. Business became more competitive by reducing costs and expanding internationally. America shifted its focus from manufacturing to services, as did Europe, with only Germany, which has a worldwide reputation for technical R&D, maintaining a significant world-class manufacturing sector. In Britain, manufacturing declined precipitously and contributed only 14 per cent to GDP by 2007. At the same time, Britain's service sectors, especially finance, media and telecommunications,

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expanded quickly. Throughout Europe, each generation saw a further shift to these services. Western governments were enthusiastic because the alternative was unemployment.

I described this change in *The Creative Economy*:

On the supply side, automation in manufacturing industries and, to a smaller extent, in the service industries has cut the demand for manual labour, so young people are looking elsewhere for work. Many turn to the creative industries which offer an attractive lifestyle and above-average economic rewards. Market economies are skilful at meeting consumer needs, especially in the field of entertainment where consumer needs are so passionate and evanescent. Suppliers have become adept at charging for pleasure.<sup>6</sup>

Since then, these trends have become more pronounced. In 2007, Will Hutton, Director of the British Work Foundation, said, 'The trends behind this phenomenon – rich, discerning consumers seeking cultural satisfaction, and multiple businesses aiming to supply it, often using new technologies – are likely to grow'. In most European cities, about 50 per cent of workers work in so-called 'knowledge industries' and about 10 per cent in creative industries.

Manufacturing costs have fallen in absolute terms and as a proportion of total cost, while the costs of services such as design, branding, marketing, advertising, licensing, distribution and retailing have increased. Head offices now focus on owning brands and contract-out or off-shore their factories. This restructuring has shifted value chains. Companies still want lower costs and higher productivity but their chief targets are elsewhere. Upstream, design has become more important;

while downstream services now take between 50 per cent and 80 per cent of total costs.

The results are obvious on every High Street. By the 1980s, the process of buying had become as important as the thing bought, offering people multiple opportunities to express their own personality and to share in other people's personalities. People want to be similar to some people and dissimilar to others and therefore buy things that are bought by people whose tastes they want to share, even if they can only afford a fake copy. Retail strategies persuade people to express themselves in three stages: first when they buy it, second when they use it and third when they reuse it to fuel their own creativity.

Significantly, these changes were not mirrored elsewhere. Countries that were not part of the European Enlightenment and consequent industrialisation have not since overtaken those that were, with the dramatic exception of China. There are numerous interpretations of this divide. Jared Diamond emphasises biology and geography, while William Baumol and others prefer political and social structures. We are far from being able to deduce the reasons. But it is unarguable that, where Enlightenment principles did take root, creative economies later emerged, and where they did not, creative economies did not seem to come naturally.

### **Circles of desire**

The human desires behind this development were categorised by the American psychologist Abraham Maslow in his hierarchy of human needs. He suggested that our most basic

needs, at the bottom, are our physical needs for air, water, food and sex. Only if these were satisfied, even temporarily, did we express needs for safety (security, stability) and then next for belonging, love and acceptance from family and friends. Next is the need for more generalised esteem from colleagues and even strangers. At the top is our need for self-actualisation or self-fulfilment.

Maslow spent years clarifying and refining what he meant by self-fulfilment, and in 1970, just before he died, he replaced the term with two others: the 'aesthetic' and the 'cognitive'. By 'aesthetic' he meant our appreciation of beauty, which is too often ignored in discussions of creativity. By 'cognitive' he meant our desire for knowledge and particularly for understanding knowledge (I refer to this later as 'creativity needs freedom'). As creativity is the most basic expression of self-fulfilment, it is tempting to put it at the top. I said in *The Creative Economy* that 'We should not be surprised if people, whose material needs are largely satisfied and who have a high level of disposable income, remix their ambitions and put a premium on matters of the mind'.<sup>7</sup> Any convincing notion of what is happening in the creative ecology has to take account of these psychological and aesthetic elements.

### Searching for a name

There have been many attempts to label these successive changes in people's relationship to ideas, information and knowledge. In the 1950s, building on Thorstein Veblen's ideas about 'conspicuous consumption', people began to talk about the *consumer society*, driven by advertising and exploiting rising incomes, as described in David Riesman's *The*

*Lonely Crowd*, William H. Whyte's *The Organisation Man* and Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*. (I note in passing economist Joseph Schumpeter's remark a few years earlier that "The evolution of the capitalist style of life could be easily – and perhaps most tellingly – described in terms of the genesis of the modern lounge suit'.)<sup>8</sup>

With the spread of computers, people talked of the *information society*. The ease with which computers generated data led to talk of information overload (some Asian societies are still worried about this). Meanwhile, Americans, enjoying the internet's sense of collaboration and community, talked of the *wired economy* and *network economy*. In Europe, realising that raw information was not enough, people preferred to speak of 'knowledge' and in 2004 the European Union adopted the *knowledge economy* as its slogan.

### **The challenge: bringing the focus back to people**

All these labels miss something vital. We need to recognise the dynamic process of individuals using ideas to explore and re-fashion their personal understanding of the world. We need to treat people not as economic units but as autonomous, thinking individuals. We also need to accept the fuzzy, contingent nature of knowledge.

The challenge is to integrate this new understanding of individual creativity with our wider understanding of social development. The theory of the creative ecology sets out a possible framework. It tries to answer these questions:

- What is the nature of creativity?
- What is the nature of creative work and the creative economy?

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- What is their relation to other factors of change, such as innovation?
- How does a market in ideas operate?
- What should governments do, if anything?

At best, it provides a model of the way in which people actually have ideas and how they develop them, sometimes as work, sometimes not as work at all. It is a concept in evolution and appears in many guises, as is seen in the next chapter.