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Creative precariousness, urban discontent and cultural networks:

An introduction to a public lecture with Néstor García Canclini

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Abstract

Following from a public lecture at City University London, the articles discuss the interface between creativity, urban transformation, precariousness and social networking. This introduction places the lecture within the framework of North–South academic exchanges and in relation to how Latin American cities are responding to the rise of the creative economy in urban policy development. The main article, written by Néstor García Canclini, provides the foundation for an anthropology of precariousness and creativity in the context of globalised urban discontent and the transformation of space through information technologies. Voicing classical cultural studies concerns about identities, economy, global imaginaries and political resistance, he examines the strategies and networks that young creative producers, cultural entrepreneurs and artists use to navigate contradictory transnational processes. The article offers a renewed critical perspective into creative urbanism, connecting local cultural practices with global processes of neoliberal economic restructuring, urban violence and social exclusion. In doing so, it delineates the possibilities for an emancipatory transformation of urban space in times of increasing uncertainty.

Keywords

creativity, Latin American cities, networks, precariousness, social movements, transnationalisation, young people

At a time when Latin American cities are recovering from a historical legacy of colonial exploitation and power abuse, structural inequality, violent dictatorships and economic crises, foregrounding their cultural and creative production is a welcome endeavour. Creativity manifests in cities through a myriad of material and symbolic forms, in streets, buildings and districts, and as a result of both planned and rebellious processes, some- times linked to local needs, at others to international policy agendas. From public art interventions, graffiti and street theatre, to arts festivals, carnival parades and the work of big cultural institutions and social movements, creativity is at the core of the social life of cities. Engaging with this theme, a public lecture with leading cultural studies figure Professor Néstor García Canclini (Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana in Mexico City) was organised at City University London on 12 May 2015, and eminent Professors Angela McRobbie (Goldsmiths) and Gareth Jones (London School of Economics and Political Science) were also invited to provide a response, generating an exciting intellectual exchange.

García Canclini's lecture 'Urban spaces and networks: young people's creativity', delivered in Spanish with English translation, sought to present the foundation for an anthropology of precariousness and creativity in Latin America in dialogue with international cases and scholarship. The event was framed by the work of the Centre for Culture and the Creative Industries (Department of Sociology) at City University London around cultural policy, the creative economy, labour organisation and cities, and anticipated the anniversary of the MA Programme in Cultural Policy & Management, which in 2016 will be celebrating its 40 years of education and research in the cultural and creative industries.

The location of the public lecture – London, a city that has pioneered the production of urban theory about the cultural and creative industries – was suggestive of the need to unsettle the universality of creative city models inspired in the UK experience often implied in policy transfer attempts. Thinking Latin American creativity from a distant European context makes visible the complex ways in which globalising processes are imagined and a variety of narrations are constructed (García Canclini, 2014). It can also be productive in challenging a common twofold misrepresentation, where the study of urban creativity is skewed towards cities of the global North and where poorer cities are

predominantly interpreted in terms of their lack of various qualities (Robinson, 2002), making international news only on account of their problems, crises or disasters. Much of the academic literature on urban creativity published in the global North in recent decades has shed light on the potential benefits of urban agglomeration and clustering of cultural and creative firms, the precarious nature of cultural and creative labour, the strong participation of the cultural and creative industries in local and national economies, and the policy uses and abuses of a creativity discourse for city branding and place-making. Less attention has been paid to how formal and informal cultural and creative undertakings are transforming cities in other regions.

So how is Latin America responding to the rise of the creative city as the new urban policy mantra (Pratt, 2010)? While the emergence of such policy is still recent in the region, the creative economy field is developing at great speed. In the last decade the global function of creativity as an urban development strategy has demarcated an area of policy intervention, encouraged by international organisations such as UNESCO and UNCTAD, aimed primarily at developing the cultural and the creative industries. Despite its exceptional importance, the creative sector's contribution to employment and national economies remains largely invisible to the general public and the official government measurements in Latin America and the Caribbean (Buitrago and Duque, 2013). The creativity rhetoric is nonetheless being re-appropriated in policy circles of the global South, where it crystallises in the provision of public support towards entrepreneurial economic development, urban renewal and cultural production. A creative urban imaginary is thus being configured through a combination of initiatives: creative industry mapping programmes in Chile; creative passes for young people in Uruguay; new policy agencies, university observatories and grassroots cultural policies in Brazil; specialised cultural and creative industry markets, incubators and districts in Argentina; informal networks and digital platforms in Mexico; and public-private sector creative coalitions in Colombia, among many others. This fascination with the creative economy is part of a broader creative turn in urban cultural policy and planning occurring at a global level.

Yet inequality has only deepened in the last decades and Latin America, together with the Caribbean, remains the most unequal region in the world (UN-Habitat, 2012). When it comes to cultural work,

precariousness and widespread informality shape the everyday production of culture and creative goods and services, leaving aside the asymmetrical access to the production and consumption of cultural resources. It is well documented now that the *actual* conditions of cultural and creative labour are marked by freelance, part-time, precarious and casual work, as well as disadvantages across gender, class, race and ethnicity (Banks et al., 2013; Gill and Pratt, 2008; McRobbie, 2010). The exploitative and exclusionary nature of present-day capitalism demands changes in the legislation governing creative work that go beyond a rhetorical policy fascination with the creative economy.

It is in this context that García Canclini's illuminating social and cultural thought on creativity and globalised urban discontent becomes most relevant. Voicing classical cultural studies concerns about identities, economy, global imaginaries and political resistance, he poses a fundamental question: 'Are we experiencing now the globalisation of the failures of the potential of global cities and the rise of rebellions against the transnational alliances of corporations in the name of a new community solidarity?' With the wide-ranging scope and interdisciplinary critical lens that characterises his work, he provides an insightful account, based on theoretical analysis and ethnographic exploration, of the situated strategies and networks that young creative producers, cultural entrepreneurs and artists use to navigate contradictory transnational processes. In doing so, he offers a renewed critical perspective on the landscape of creativity in the city, delineating the possibilities for an emancipatory transformation of urban space in times of increasing uncertainty.

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Biography

Cecilia Dinardi has a PhD in Sociology (London School of Economics and Political Science, LSE), a MSc in Culture and Society (LSE) and a BSc in Sociology (Universidad de Buenos Aires). She is Urban Studies Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Centre for Culture and the Creative Industries, Department of Sociology, City University London. Her research interests are in the politics of culture, cultural policies, grassroots creativity, cities and urban regeneration, with a special focus on Latin America. She has published academic papers in international journals such as *Urban Studies* and *City, Culture and Society*, and co-edited the book *Writing Cities* (vol. 1) published by the London School of Economics (LSE).