

What are the benefits of creative collaboration in a moral economy?



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~~More and more local communities around the world, such as the São Salvador rural settlement in Parana, Brazil, and the Appalachian mountain communities in the USA, are adopting the so-called ‘moral economy’ systems and in this article we reflect on the benefits of creative collaboration in such systems.

The origins of the ‘moral economy’ concept can be traced back to Aristotle (384-322 BC) (Staveren, 2001) in ancient Greece, who believed in a natural relationship between economic practices, moral order and social good, advocating economics based on the values of fairness and goodness. In modern times, the term ‘moral economy’ was used by Thomson (1998) in his analysis of the late 18th century crowd rebellion in England, during the painful transition of an economy based on agriculture to an industrialised economy which led to various forms of protest including ‘food riots’. Although there is an aggressive connotation to the word ‘riot’, the 18th century food riots were not merely expressions of anger and violence but were instead fuelled by a collective belief in the poor peoples’ moral right to fair subsistence.

In the middle of the 18th century, Smith (1984) applied the notion of moral economy to the modern world of economy and business in the 18th century. He added further elements to the concept such as ‘moral sentiment’, ‘virtues’ and ‘self-interest’. Consistent with Smith’s beliefs, Sayer (2000) advocates the basic function of a moral economy is to nurture well-being for each member of society. Therefore, it is presumed that every economic relationship should be based on benevolence, sympathy and morality.

These values and virtues advocated by proponents of a moral economy, resonate well with those who favour systems that are creative and collaborative, with an assumption that there are bound to be natural benefits of creative collaboration in a moral economy. In reflecting on these benefits, in this article we consider how creative collaboration can be (but not always) beneficial in a business environment established on the principles of a moral economy.

Popular definitions of creativity

Although most stakeholders in the economic system, such as the government, educators and industry leaders recognise the importance of creativity in an increasingly competitive global business environment, one of the most popular advocates of creativity in education is Sir Ken Robinson (2011), author of “Out of our minds”. In August 2014, his YouTube video entitled “Do schools kill creativity?” (Robinson, 2007) has already been watched almost 7 million times, indicating the international appeal of his views on the subject of creativity. His message is that creativity, which he defines as “the process of having original ideas that have value”, is as important as literacy and that both can be learnt and should be taught in compulsory school education.

Robinson highlights collaboration as being a key element in creativity and that:

“Creativity is a process more often than it is an event. To call something a process indicates a relationship between its various elements: that each aspect and phase of what happens is related to every other. Being creative involves several processes that interweave within each other. The first is generative. The second is evaluative.” (Robinson, 2011: 151)

The popular notion of creativity advocated by Robinson (2011) as being simply a “process of having original ideas that have value” does not address the questions of “Original to whom?” and “Of value to whom?” which are implied in the work of another popular author on creativity, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2013) who argues that,

“If by creativity we mean an idea or action that is new and valuable, then we cannot simply accept a person’s own account as the criterion for its existence. There is no way to know whether a thought is new except with reference to some standards, and there is no way to tell whether it is valuable until it passes social evaluation. Therefore, creativity does not happen inside people’s heads, but in the interaction between a person’s thoughts and a sociocultural context. It is a systemic rather than an individual phenomenon.” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2013: 23)

Is creativity individual or collective?

The simple pragmatic definition of creativity, proposed by Robinson (2011) stating that creativity is the process of generating original ideas that have value can be further elaborated with Csikszentmihalyi’s (2013: 27) concern that the value of these original ideas has to be judged by experts in the field and within the “domain which consists of a set of symbolic rules and procedures”. In Csikszentmihalyi’s view, the individual person is merely the third component of the creative system (the first being the domain and the second being the field). Robinson (2011) agrees that “Creativity is about making connections and is usually driven more by collaboration than by solo efforts.” (Robinson, 2011: 211)

Creative engagement and a moral economy in Appalachia

In her blog entitled “Creative engagement and a moral economy in Appalachia”, Atlas (2013) explains that the Appalachian communities in the USA are one of the poorest in the country after the severe decline in coal mining in the region. She highlights the work of Helen Lewis, author of “Rebuilding Communities: A Twelve Step Recovery Program” who suggests plans for shifting from “an extractive economy to a sustainable economy through creative and accountable civic engagement.”

Lewis calls for a moral economy that values sustainability, so local resources are strengthened rather than depleted. This requires creativity. In order to disrupt existing power relationships, Lewis suggests “imaginative action” which we may infer is based on new ideas that add value in building a moral economy, to meet the needs of the Appalachian community.

Creativity flows through collaboration and social networks that branch out, just beyond the existing comfort zone, so that new connections are made, adding value that results in a growth in the moral economy. Grassroots movements committed to establishing a moral economy need to harness the power of social networks that generate creativity through stimulation of new ideas that add value leading to creative actions that inspire beneficial change for the local community.

The useful impact of social networks varies depending on the organisational structures in different economic systems. For example, in the capitalist economy, hierarchical structures can be so deep that it seems plausible that a tiny minority at the top of the hierarchy controls the vast majority of the total wealth in the system. In contrast, in socialist economic systems, flatter hierarchical structures are meant to divide wealth more equally within the system. A moral economy shares features of the social economic system, for example its focus on ensuring fairness and justice in society, but differs in its allocation of responsibility to the richest and most powerful towards the poorest and weakest members. In a moral economy, everyone has equal rights, although this equality is not necessarily expected to result in equal economic wealth. Social networks, facilitated by technology, allow a platform of equality, regardless of the economic system in which they occur, and the creative collaboration they make possible, can be used as a tool to generate wealth and well-being. For example, in the Appalachia example above, the moral economy of the local community is embedded within a larger capitalist system of the USA. The social networks enable each member of the local community to be empowered and generate wealth through creative collaboration that extends the limitations imposed by lack of resources in a capitalist system.

Prohibitionists and the moral economy

Empowerment of individuals and other merits of creative collaboration such as generation of wealth and well-being, are not universally accepted. For example, Jenkins (2008) analyses the concerns of business people and creative workers regarding the damage caused by creative collaboration to their livelihoods. He comments that “For the creative, the fear is a corruption of their artistic integrity” and that “For the business side, the greatest fear is the idea that consumers might take something they made and not pay them for it...”

Advocates of a creative, collaborative approach, tend to favour disruptive practices that challenge the status quo and enable desirable change at the grassroots level. Jenkins explains the contrast between the collaborationist and its opposing prohibitionist approach as follows:

“If the collaborationist approach welcomes fans as potential allies, the prohibitionist approach sees fans as a threat to their control over the circulation of, and production of meaning around, their content. Consumers are read as “pirates” whose acts of repurposing and recirculation constitute theft. The prohibitionist approach seeks to restrict participation, pushing it from public view.” (Jenkins, 2008)

Jenkins discusses the industry discourse which portrays those who collaborate with their peers through sharing of music for example, as “selfish, improperly socialized people who simply want to get something — the fruits of other people’s labor — for free.” He notes, however, that this media portrayal “doesn’t fully acknowledge the willingness of supporters to spend their own time and money to facilitate the circulation of valued content, whether in the form of a “mix tape” given to one person or a website with sound files that can be downloaded by any and all.”

Creativity thrives through collaboration and is thwarted by prohibitionism. Creativity in action, for example the process of modifying something that already exists, to create something new, often adds value to a moral economy, undermining moral and legal arguments to support intellectual property rights. On the other hand, prohibitionism, protects existing ideas while discouraging the generation of new ideas which may lead to innovation that is useful for the community as a whole.

Jenkins (2008) contrasts the pro-collaboration perspective with the work of writers such as Keen (2007), “who suggests that the unauthorized circulation of intellectual property through peer-to-peer networks and the free labor of fans and bloggers constitute a serious threat to the long-term viability of the creative industries. Here, it is audience activity which exceeds the moral economy. In his nightmarish scenario, professional editorial standards are giving way to mob rule and the work of professional writers, performers, and media makers is being reduced to raw materials for the masses who show growing contempt for traditional expertise and disrespect for intellectual property rights.” “The way to keep the recorded-music industry vibrant and support new bands and music is to be

willing to support them with our dollars — to stop stealing the sweat of other people’s creative labor” (Keen 2007, p. 188).

Even local communities will produce members who wish to safeguard their intellectual property rights, copyright and trademarks and wish to be economically well-rewarded for their talents. However, in a moral economy, self-interest does not bear a negative connotation equating it with selfishness. In fact, individuals are expected to be guided by self-interest as they struggle to achieve their goals, fulfilment of which will create wealth enabling the community to develop as a whole. Therefore, creative collaboration is highly encouraged in local communities and in fact, this is the most important tool in overcoming tragedies resulting from natural disasters and the lack of resources to invest in livelihoods to support the individual and their family. A moral economy seeks to guarantee social protection from challenges such as unemployment, homelessness and hunger.

Given the current turbulence and insecurity in world affairs, a system that not only promises but provides, protection and well-being, is a ray of optimism, signalling transformation in the global economic patterns that have marginalised and isolated the poor to fend for themselves.

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