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## The Political Economy of Creativity

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**ABSTRACT:** *Historical, political, and social influences greatly constrict creative activity and creative self-expression in the arts, sciences, and entrepreneurship. Moreover, the differential distribution of power and resources among individuals and groups in society, as well as the impact of the norm of self-interest in Western capitalist cultures, deeply constrain creative self-expression. This includes political and religious censorship, corporate control and influence, copyright restrictions, as well as cultural and economic constraints. Communitarianism—the school of political thought that holds that individual self-expression is best nurtured within communities of association—proposes that creative activity emerges from a shared sense of community whose lingua franca is social capital, not merely human capital. Any creative product, therefore, emerges from a unique coincidence of individual intellectual abilities; the social and cultural organization of a scientific, artistic, or entrepreneurial domain; the structure and complexity of the field of legitimization; and the distribution of power and resources within a group, community, or society.*

### Individual and Community

The prevalence of the “genius” view in contemporary American culture provides an important lens on the political economy of creativity. The genius view consists in the belief that (a) creative persons have unusual and phenomenal thought processes, and (b) these thought processes are largely unconscious and operate through flashes of insight (see Weisberg, 1993, for an extended discussion of these beliefs). Scientific studies of creative individuals (e.g., Charles Darwin), however, support just the opposite interpretation: that creative solutions are slow and incremental and involve the con-

scious testing and rejecting of ideas (e.g., Gruber, 1981; Weisberg, 1993). Yet, creative solutions are not conceived in isolation but are worked out through direct or indirect contact with others including the influence of previous historical developments in the field of inquiry (Alperovitz, 1994). For example, science is the cumulative knowledge of many individuals, rarely an isolated breakthrough. One important view of the development of the sciences is a succession of revolutionary breaks in theory, method, or institutional structure set against a sustained background of tradition-bound periods (Kuhn, 1970). Shared scientific values held during these entrenched periods can be seen as a way of diversifying creative risk within the scientific community. Art and politics may follow a similar periodization, with occasional revolutionary punctuations affecting artistic preferences or forms of political government, thus, Karl Marx’s view that art and politics are the surface manifestations of the same underlying social order (Marx, 1977). To be sure, groups of artists regularly share artistic and social bonds that deeply influence emerging artistic developments (Chadwick & de Courtivron, 1993); the emergence of cubism in the visual arts in the beginning of the 20th century is a poignant example (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000).

Weisberg (1986, 1993) has argued that artistic genius does not consist in some extraordinary individual’s effort at self-expression but the interaction between a

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work of art and the receptivity of an audience to the work of art at a particular historical point in time:

It is a mistake to look for genius either in the individual or in an individual's work. Rather, genius is a characteristic that society bestows upon an individual in response to his or her work. (Weisberg, 1986, p. 88)

For instance, the premiere of Igor Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* in Paris in the early part of the 20th century was initially greeted with overwhelming hostility. Only much later was Stravinsky acknowledged as a 20th century musical genius (Gardner, 1993). On this view, genius is not the exclusive possession of an individual, but a characteristic that a community or society may bestow upon an individual in response to a work of art. It is a multidirectional relationship among political, cultural, and social forces and the individual that creates "genius," rather than a unidirectional one in which some extraordinary human creates the world anew (Weisberg, 1986, 1993). Nevertheless, uncommunitized personhood may be a significant source of creativity and transformation within a community, organization, or institution (Etzioni, 1996). Thus, the Swiss psychologist, Jean Piaget, in his advice to creative scientists, advocated solitary creative striving, in order to avoid outside influences from the community (Bringuier, 1980, pp. 126-127; Piaget, 1981) in spite of (or because of) his recognition of the deep interdisciplinary and collaborative nature of science (Bringuier, 1980, p. 18). Similarly, Dean Keith Simonton (1994)—who otherwise takes a "emergenetic" view of genius and advocates a "great man" theory of history—acknowledges that cumulative advantage may accrue to those scientists who are judged to make the most significant contributions to their field of inquiry at the expense of less senior ones, as well as a host of other outside social influences on eminent individuals.<sup>1</sup>

Creative activity, therefore, is the confluence of the imaginative and intellectual potential of an individual, exposure of individual creative initiative and activity

to divergent social enclaves, as well as the constraints of the surrounding political, cultural, and social milieu. Such a perspective goes beyond C. P. Snow's classic dichotomy of two creative cultures—art and science—to recognize the central importance of political and cultural restraints on individual creative initiative. This so-called "third culture" (Brockman, 1997) includes political or religious censorship (e.g., the defunding of the National Endowment of Arts), as well as large corporate bodies controlling access to resources and information exchange (e.g., corporate gifts to individual scientists) through copyright restrictions or through related economic constraints (e.g., monopoly, oligopoly, or cartel).

### Person, Domain, and Field

An important perspective on the problem of constraints in the microenvironment—the immediate creative context—is found in the relation among person, domain, and field. In this view, creativity, at first approximation, is the way in which creative abilities or skills are deployed (Feldman, Csikszentmihalyi, & Gardner, 1994; Gardner, 1986, 1988, 1993) rather than the abilities themselves (e.g., cognitive style, strategies, or attitudes; Perkins, 1988). It is the unusualness or asymmetry of the particular concatenation of intellectual skills, combined with a distinctive blend of personality characteristics that are crucial to this intraindividual aspect of creativity (Gardner, 1993). Of the latter, key facets of the creative temperament include, among other things, a problem-finding attitude, perseverance in the face of social opprobrium, and tolerance of ambiguity, combined with a strong need for order (Nickerson, Perkins, & Smith, 1985). Problem solving involves solving existing problems, formulated by others (as on a test or exam); problem finding entails finding new problems to solve, such as a financial analyst formulating new solutions to making money on differences in stock prices (e.g., deriva-

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<sup>1</sup>For a trenchant criticism of the "great man" theory of history see, Foner (1999) or Zinn (1995). Nonetheless, Simonton (1984) acknowledges the impact of social factors on eminent individuals (e.g., paragons, rivals, associates, apprentices, and admirers). There is a long history to this debate, however. For instance, Freud (1930/1961) characterized the cultural superego as representing the legacy of the

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personalities of great leaders, suggesting an elitist notion of history and civilization. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, on the other hand, believed that social and economic inequality resulted from the balkanization of individual talents among people, and represents the opposite view (Rousseau, 1750/1992).

tives). What is important, however, is that there is an asymmetry among a particular concatenation of intellectual skills that is statistically insignificant in the population. So, Freud's creative asymmetry consisted of strong scientific leanings that were uncomfortably set within an intellectual temperament of unusual interest in the emotional life of human beings and a literary bent (Gardner, 1993). Beyond these intraindividual elements, however, the role of the cultural and symbolic organization of a domain and the nature of the social-institutional and political field are both highly significant in the efflorescence of creative activity.

Indeed, it is not enough that the individual has an unusual concatenation of intellectual abilities, for it is the disciplinary or occupational, that is cultural, domain itself that shapes and transmits creative and intellectual skills, disciplinary modes of thought, and historical understanding of the discipline or domain, to the individual. The domain can be thought of as "a stable cultural realm that preserves and transmits new ideas or forms" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988, p. 368). For instance, one can learn the complex skills of a pastry chef employed at a three-star restaurant by immersing oneself in the day-to-day activities of pastry making: the biology and chemistry of foodstuffs, the art of glazing, the technology of baking, and so on. This knowledge may be acquired formally or informally—for instance, through a traditional apprenticeship (Seitz, 1997, 1999, 2000a). The extent to which a domain is undeveloped or new (e.g., computer software design) affects the acquisition and creative possibilities in a domain. So, the domain may offer new creative possibilities to an enterprising entrepreneur (e.g., Bill Gates of Microsoft), who is then in a position to influence corporate and business institutions to use the company's new products.

Yet, it is a collection of social institutions or, rather, the social and cultural organization of a domain that legitimates the creative products of the individual, that is, collectors, philanthropists, critics, curators, museum directors, scientific review panels, professional associations, industry leaders, and so on. Thus, the field can be conceptualized as the panoply of political and social institutions that "select from variations produced by individuals those worth preserving" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988, p. 372). Indeed, Picasso's first significant works of art as a young adult were initially recognized and promoted by only a small group

of patrons. Or, the field may shape the development of new creative ideas in an individual (e.g., Steven Jobs of Apple Computer), who then begins to refashion a particular domain (e.g., the invention of the personal computer). Hence, it is this interlocking triumvirate of individuals, the symbol system of a domain (i.e., languages, visual art constructions, architectural drawings, musical compositions, and so forth), and social and political institutions where creativity is to be found rather than in the mind of a "lone genius"—a mystification that unduly elevates the creative individual to a deity—but within a system of shared alliances in which the individual is just one aspect. Indeed, in capitalist cultures, the individual is situated within a matrix of market relations and market competition.

### Market View of Creative Activity

One substantive approach to the problem of constraints in the macroenvironment—the social, political, and institutional context—has been to conceive of individual creativity as an "investment" in a scientific, artistic, or entrepreneurial domain in which there is a chance of a significant creative payoff (Sternberg & Lubart, 1995). While intraindividual elements are important (i.e., mental processes, background knowledge, intellectual style, personality, motivation, and so on), these factors themselves are influenced by the social and cultural contexts that serve to both nurture creativity and to evaluate and legitimate creative ideas and their products (Sternberg, 1994). Because so many social and cultural forces must converge to promote creative activity, few people are willing to invest in it. The investment metaphor is quite apt. On this view, creativity is conceptualized as the result of "buy(ing) low and sell(ing) high" (Sternberg & Lubart, 1991). Creativity is the process of generating unpopular ideas—whether literary, visual, musical, political, economic, etc.—and convincing others of their relative value (Sternberg, 1994). That is to say, creativity only emerges within a larger social matrix, in which ideas are commodities and their value in the intellectual marketplace is both galvanized and suppressed by extant politico-social organizations and institutions. Indeed, the influence of political and cultural institutions on artistic production and activity within the art world is instructive.

## **The Arts, Sciences, and Entrepreneurship**

### **The Institutionalization of the Arts**

As early as the 18th century, art came to be increasingly viewed as reflecting national character or values, particularly as represented in national museums (e.g., the French Louvre, the British Museum, and the Rijksmuseum in Holland) and “schools” of art (e.g., Italian, Flemish, Dutch, and French). The Musée Napoleon in France was the first to exhibit art to the public at large due to the advancement of individual rights during the French Revolution (Danto, 1992). This democratization of art reflected the liberal political order that had begun to emerge during this period. Indeed, according to the 19th century German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, art superseded religious belief, and the artist became a symbol of the national spirit (Nietzsche, 1887/1994).

Out of this liberal political and social order, moreover, art came to be seen as a basic human right, and governments began to acknowledge that they should not interfere with the exercise of artistic freedom. On the other hand, there is a long history of artistic and intellectual censorship going back to the early Greeks, who viewed art as dangerous to the community. To be sure, Plato claimed that poetic representation “obscures law and the shared acceptance of reason and one will be guided by pleasure and pain” (Cornford, 1941, p. 607a).

Nonetheless, in a recent controversy in the United States, a report from the National Endowment of the Arts suggested that art institutions have become elitist, class-based, and ethnocentric, as well as isolated from the communities they serve (Larson, 1997). As a result, the arts have been marginalized in American culture, with a consequent decline of arts education in the public schools, including support for modern and contemporary art and artists. The report indicated that in 1997, 50 art organizations received 32% of all corporate and private funding, of which five states accounted for 65% of the total. Community-based (e.g., folk), experimental, underground, and cross-disciplinary art were almost entirely ignored by both public and private funding agencies. For example, during this period the National Endowment of the Arts eliminated individual federal grants for artists, and private foundations began to increasingly fund art under guidelines and goals that advanced corporate interests

at the expense of community needs and artistic and intellectual diversity.

Thus, the elite arts community (the “art world”; Danto, 1992) has neglected aspects of participation, democratization, and popularization that has led to the isolation of American arts groups. What the report suggests is that museums as cultural institutions have walled themselves off from the rest of society because museums themselves are elitist and consist of largely wealthy, older, white patrons. For example, the board of trustees of the Metropolitan Museum of Art is composed of some of the most financially prominent New Yorkers, in spite of the fact that it is a public institution that receives substantial tax levies from New York City. Moreover, by enshrining art in the temples of culture, the report suggests, individuals have lost touch with its direct relevance to their lives, as well as the fact that cultural institutions stress formal aspects of the arts without promoting their participatory elements or their pervasiveness. While it is true that museum attendance is up nationwide, those attending are largely white and middle-class. Even those that attend museums tend to be brought in by the “blockbuster” shows, rather than attendance emanating from a deep appreciation of museums as cultural institutions. What this suggests is that cultural institutions have remained elitist and exclusionary, rather than democratic and participatory. The inclusion of the latter would ensure that museums and other cultural institutions reflect and include a wider diversity of interests and values (Larson, 1997). Ultimately, these kinds of changes will improve the aesthetic quality of art at museum shows, particularly modern and contemporary art, because it will include and potentially value the work of everyone in the community, ensuring a wider acceptance of new art (Seitz, 2000b). In the fields of software and hardware technologies, however, innovation and change are embraced, if not required, in order to survive as a business or corporate entity.

### **Creativity and Entrepreneurship**

Within the entrepreneurial field, the extraordinary development of computer hardware and software technologies, particularly in the United States, may be understood as the result of a confluence of variables at the individual, community, and national levels. Much of it has been centered geographically in the culture of Sili-

con Valley in northern California. This culture is distinguished by (a) webs of interlocking relationships among companies in close proximity; (b) collaboration, cooperation, and coordination in product development (e.g., the Intel-Microsoft alliance); (c) minimal bureaucracy and command structures, resulting in flatter, more democratic organizations with diminished management hierarchies; and (d) a risk-tolerant culture in which failure is rewarded by others. Moreover, there is a rich ecosystem of diverse companies and individual talent, an entrepreneurial infrastructure of ancillary businesses and financial concerns (e.g., venture capital and banking, law, and real-estate firms), business-government partnerships (e.g., Internet access in community schools), and a synergy among executives and employees, many of whom inhabit the same work environments, cafes, and outdoor surroundings that promote the cross-fertilization of creative ideas and activities. Even the local universities provide more technologically savvy graduates to this region than to any other area in the United States (Business Week, 1997).

The success of Silicon Valley, moreover, highlights the importance of social capital as distinct from human capital. Whereas human capital reflects individual endowments of education and abilities, social capital underscores the importance of access to information and resources, group membership, webs of dense interlocking social relationships that reflect rich voluntary associations, as well as independent media (Inglehart, 2000; Putnam, 1993; Weiming, 2000). This emphasis is important because it asserts that individuals situated within communal and institutional contexts are best able to pursue and define their interests in diverse ways. Moreover, rich voluntary associations facilitate independence and change and promote novelty by increasing access and communication among individuals and institutions through information exchange and individual and group decision making. Indeed, studies of civic cultures, cultures with strong voluntary associations, indicate that civic governments are less hierarchical and authoritarian, as well as more innovative in facilitating decentralization, flexible specialization, and integration among businesses and individuals (Putnam, 1993). The tremendous creative and financial success of Silicon Valley has a great deal to do with the horizontal integration of businesses, particularly the interlocking network of investment bankers, venture capitalists, real-estate brokers, and ancillary businesses that provide physical and investment capi-

tal to emerging hi-tech firms within the technological community. Nonetheless, such “constitutive communities” are subject to authoritarianism, patriarchalism, and social conformity when elite groups—particularly large businesses and corporations—enforce their own market prerogatives at the expense of the wider community (Benhabib, 1992). Such a situation has been ably documented in the natural sciences.

### Corporate Influences on Science

Corporate and company influence on research is significantly leveraged in the natural sciences and exerts tremendous pressure on scientists in both what they study and how they study it. For example, in a study of academic-industry research partnerships in the life sciences, it was reported that close to 50% of scientists had received corporate gifts (Campbell, Louis, & Blumenthal, 1998). These gifts included biomaterials (e.g., viral cultures), research equipment, and travel and discretionary funds, as well as student support. But, companies often demanded acknowledgment and co-authorship, restriction of gifts both in use and in transmission to third parties, prepublication review of articles and reports, mandatory testing of company products, and ownership of potential patents. University faculty members who received more gifts were more likely to publish in refereed journals, as well as produce more patentable products and start-up companies. Indeed, in at least one case, a company attempted to suppress research findings when it was found that a pharmaceutical drug worked no better than a less expensive generic drug (Campbell et al., 1998).

The influence of larger social and political structures that bear on creative activity and creative self-expression are examined in the last section. These structures include forms of political government that promote individualism and community, as well as constraints placed on individuals by the capitalist economic system.

### Individualism and Creative Inheritance

#### Liberalism and the Creative Individual

A theory of government and society that became increasingly influential in the 17th century, liberalism



created the conditions for individualism. These conditions are currently demarcated in contemporary Western democracies according to three premises. The first premise requires that all citizens receive equal treatment and consideration, independent of any particular conception of what is an acceptable lifestyle—that is, one either advocated by state ideology or formal government intervention. Similarly, the second and third premises set the conditions for individualism by endorsing both representative democracy and a market economy, as these promote the economic and ethnic equality of all citizens (Dworkin, 1978). Thus, by institutionalizing fair and equal consideration of the needs of all citizens within a system of market relations and political representation of the people's will, liberalism fosters creative production by encouraging individual creative expression. In such a system, however, negative liberty is favored over positive liberty (Berlin, 1958). While negative liberty represents an individual's freedom from interference by others, positive or *developmental* liberty goes beyond the absence of obligation or coercion and represents an individual's freedom to engage in self-government, self-determination, and self-mastery (MacPherson, 1973). Such a triumvirate, I would suggest, provides the political infrastructure for the development of creative activity and creative self-expression. Developmental liberty requires participatory democracy as a prerequisite, and this entails strong community involvement and association (Benhabib, 1992). This is necessary because there is neither a predetermined end, or value, to which all individuals must aspire nor do prevailing social institutions (e.g., federal and state governments or corporations) represent the best interests of all. Only through a "vibrant, participatory life" can self-formation and personal identity develop and flourish (Benhabib, 1992, p. 81).

According to many communitarians—the school of political thought that holds that individual self-expression is best nurtured within communities of association (see Seitz, 2002)—the liberal and neo-Marxist views of historical progress are misleading because a shared sense of community and shared ethics have been irrevocably lost (liberalism) or because traditional communities have been eliminated as a result of the hegemony of dominant elites in third world countries (neo-Marxism; Benhabib, 1992; MacIntyre, 1984). Therefore, liberal democracies, predicated on the appearance of individual choice, fail to uncouple individ-

uals from the hegemony of existing ideologies and practices while the cultural marketplace of ideas fails to unite individuals to communal practice (Kymlicka, 1990). In these liberal democracies, human creative activity is shaped by

recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible pictures of themselves. (Taylor, 1994, p. 25)

Creativity, from this broad communitarian perspective, thus emerges from the combined individual intellectual and creative profiles of numerous individuals, the history of creative ideas and their application in the domain, the field of political and cultural forces that serve their legitimization, and the differential distribution of power of individuals and groups within a community or society.

Dale Miller (1999) has shown that so-called self-interested behavior is, in fact, part of the elite ideological construct of capitalist cultures. According to Miller, individuals hold descriptive beliefs ("people are self-interested") and prescriptive beliefs ("people ought to be self-interested"). In the former, people believe that individuals are self-interested because to believe otherwise will lead to exploitation by others or a waste of time and effort. In the latter, people conceal from public view their altruistic intentions, reinforcing the belief that individuals are motivated by self-interest. Moreover, while a belief in self-interest may play a role in motivating it, such beliefs may also play a role in legitimating and justifying individual self-interested behavior. This is so, Miller argues, because individualistic capitalist cultures structure social and political institutions so that beliefs in self-interest appear natural and create social norms to induce people to pursue their material self-interests rather than creative self-expression. As Jerome Kagan has stated, "people treat self-interest as a natural law" (Kagan, 1998, p. 137), that is, universal and inevitable, rather than historically and culturally contingent. In this view, material self-interest is a mystification imposed by capitalist cultures to exploit consumer behavior and activity, rather than to promote individual creative self-expression and creative activity. In this way, liberal democracies and capitalist economic systems promote individualism and material well-being at the expense of creative

and intellectual diversity and their expression among individuals and within groups.

### Conclusions and Implications

Although mental abilities and processes are undoubtedly important in creative ability and creative self-expression, recent developments in creativity studies and in the development and expression of human potential suggest the profound influence of the creative domain, the field of legitimization, and the coincidence of many variables—political and religious censorship, corporate control and influence, copyright restrictions, and cultural and economic constraints—on the efflorescence of creative activity. To be sure, the differential distribution of power and resources among individuals and groups in society, as well as the impact of the norm of self-interest in Western capitalist cultures, deeply constrains creative activity in the arts, sciences, and entrepreneurship. This is because creative activity emerges from communities of association whose lingua franca is social capital not merely human capital. Within such communities, self-government, self-determination, and self-mastery thrive and flourish and promote the fortuitous conditions for creative activity and creative self-expression.

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