

FROM SOUTH- WEST THAILAND TO NORTHWEST JUTLAND

SEA GYPSIES IN WONDERLAND

A couple of years ago I was sitting with my family in a longtail boat in the Andaman Sea off Southwest Thailand. As I bent down to pick up a sun hat, which the sea breeze had whisked off the head of one of my sons, I spied a local newspaper crumpled up in the bottom of the boat. Everything except the English-language editorial was in Thai, a language totally foreign to my Danish eyes, so what did I do? I read it.

There we were in the middle of nowhere, not a speck of dry land in sight, bobbing about in an odd-looking, randomly assembled but apparently seaworthy vessel captained by a ‘sea gypsy’ – as our skipper and his people called themselves – and I found myself reading a piece that urged the local population to transform this part of southern Thailand into a ‘creative region’.

For many years authorities and shops in these parts have gone all in to promote tourism, creating a wonderland for holiday makers. Now, instead, influential voices want the region to prepare for a future after tourism, a future based on a catchword you will, by now, have guessed: creativity.

I was not surprised, for we are witnessing a global trend towards creativity. One could almost call it a fad. To use an image from the American sociologist Andrew Ross, it seems as if someone dropped the words ‘creative economy’ and ‘creative industries’ to Earth from a great height, spreading them, like balls of mercury exploding into a billion tiny droplets, to reach every corner of the globe.

Nowadays, everyone everywhere is relying on creativity as their economic driver.

No wonder people around the Andaman Sea also imagine that energising and harnessing local creativity will be a useful strategy. After all, millions of others want to do the same in *their* local areas: London, Seoul, Montevideo, Adelaide, Odense or the seaside hamlet of Klitmøller, a cold-water surf paradise in northwest Jutland located about as far from the Danish capital as you can get in my small nation without taking a ferry.

They are all convinced – typically after consulting an external branding agency – that they will be able to set themselves apart and use creativity to their advantage, making a ‘unique selling point’ out of their particular brand of creativity. *Creative Britain. Creative Thailand. Creative Denmark.* Continue the list if you care to. It won’t take much creative effort. Therein lies the paradox, obviously: If everyone stands out by being creative, it is hard to see how creativity can give any one place an advantage over other cities, regions or countries, or bring any of us a safer, better future.


MAKE CREATIVITY A HABIT ...

The notion of the economic blessings of creativity originated in the United Kingdom and Australia. It spread like wildfire, sparking a conflagration of very uniform and – if I may be so bold – remarkably unoriginal ideas. One cluster of theories tries to define creativity, while the other tries to work out how we can foster more of it.

The sagging bookshelves in my office testify to the immense importance attributed to creativity these days. Virtually every academic field has written copiously on the topic, especially in the last decade or so. In published works the word itself occurs twice as often as it did in 1970, and the number of books dealing with creativity as associated with work, management, economics and innovation has grown exponentially.

The most notable genre is the ‘how-to’ handbook in business literature, which teaches us how to make employees and colleagues, teams and companies, even societies more creative. Such books, despite their unabashed focus on the bottom line, also link creativity as a personality trait to our individual projects and identities. As the American choreographer Twyla Tharp put it in *The Creative Habit* from 2003, it is all about our “willingness to make it a habit”.

This has woven creativity into the fabric of a whole swathe of management philosophy, posing many questions that seem to be more personal than financial: Who can I be? Who should I be? How can I become the best version



of myself? How do I realise my full potential? Often the answer to these questions is: *Be even more creative!*

We talk about ‘creativity’ in various and often overlapping terms. It therefore makes sense to talk about ‘creativities’, as we sometimes do in my field, even though no dictionary I know lists the word in the plural. Part of the special attraction of ‘creativity’ – as a word and an idea – lies in its richly layered meanings and connotations, which are virtually always seen as positive. This quality is what makes creativity so welcoming as an object of projection, so perfect as a scaffold for our dreams and so utterly seductive.

... AND INNOVATION, TOO!

Over the last two or three decades ‘creativity’ has increasingly been used alongside another modern buzzword: ‘innovation’. In such usage ‘creativity’ typically denotes the initial phase in developing a new product or business model, a process where people often take a surprisingly linear approach. One step simply follows another. But *creativity*, many would argue, is really about coming up with an idea no one has tried before.

Innovation takes the idea one step further, and the last part of the process, *diffusion*, spreads the product, business model or idea to markets around the world. However, ‘diffusion’, is such a dry, ugly, technical word that it will probably never enjoy the same popularity as ‘innovation’ or ‘creativity’ – despite the fact that diffusion is the step

everyone is most interested in: getting the creative, innovative idea to catch on worldwide.

When discussing innovation we usually emphasise that the result of the creative process must be unique, original or genuinely new – and, not least, relevant. In this context, ‘new’ is the key word: ‘new ideas’, ‘new products’, ‘new ways of thinking or working’ and ‘new ways of doing business’.

This fixation with ‘the new’ is probably a vestige of a much older conception of some special link between creativity and art. Even so, the tough reality today is that the creative economy is closely linked to what lawyers call ‘intellectual property rights’: patents, copyrights, trademarks and the like. The pivotal point here is that society determines ownership of an idea based on who came up with it first.

DO SOMETHING - ANYTHING!

The modern link between creativity and innovation usually has an added aspect of utility value, economy and labour. This aspect is quite new, however, and just a few decades ago creativity was perceived very differently.

In historical terms, creativity has been most closely linked to art, a sphere in which financial thinking is widely abhorred. The creative force of the artist must be bound by no other agenda than the exigencies of art itself – at least so say many artists, critics, museum directors and art gallery owners. That is why the world has, instead, applauded the ideas of ‘the genius’, ‘artistic inspiration’ and the need

to express oneself, not to mention the perception that creativity somehow, mysteriously, is bestowed upon the likes of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart or Vincent van Gogh, flowing from within, from without or even from above.

We find traces of this perception in a description of the creative process often attributed to the American conceptual artist Jasper Johns. Of the many attempts to define or capture the essence of 'creativity', this is my personal favourite: It's simple, you just take something and do something to it, and then do something else to it. Keep doing this, and pretty soon you've got something. I interpret Johns' obvious manoeuvre – tiptoeing around an actual definition – in two different ways. Johns could mean that creativity is a mysterious process he cannot or will not try to describe precisely: We do something at some point, and we cannot predict the outcome. This echoes the Romantic perception from the 1800s of creativity as a wondrous, almost magical quality of the genius at work. Discussing creativity may be meaningless, even detrimental, so perhaps he is intimating that we should not speak too much about it, lest we talk it to death.

Alternatively, Johns could mean that creativity is something we all display, all the time. *We do something to something for a while, then eventually end up with something we can justifiably call 'creative'*. So much for highbrow mystique. And if we interpret the quote in this way – which is what I recommend – then creativity can be very mundane indeed, becoming an ordinary part of our daily lives.