

# The Collective Imagination

## The Creative Spirit of Free Societies

Peter Murphy

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*Thomas Hobbes wrote in Leviathan ‘those that observe their similitudes, in case they be such as are but rarely observed by others, are said to have a good wit’. I came across that passage a long time ago when researching my doctoral thesis and it stuck with me. This present work is the result of 25 years of thinking about what Hobbes said. A good number of people aided and abetted that thinking along the way. I want to thank above all Agnes Heller, to whom this work is dedicated. Agnes supervised that now-distant PhD a quarter of a century ago and among a multitude of wonderful works she wrote is one whose spirit haunts The Collective Imagination. Her book Immortal Comedy fingers laughter as the instinct of reason – and humour and wit as sublime expressions of the rationality of the intellect. To that idea, and the mirthful self-irony of reason, this book is deeply in debt.*

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PETER MURPHY

*James Cook University, Australia*

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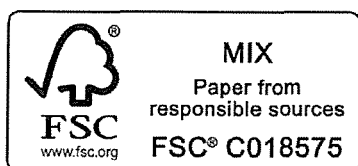
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# About the Author

Peter Murphy is Professor of Creative Arts and Social Aesthetics at James Cook University. He is author of *Civic Justice* (2001) and co-author of *Dialectic of Romanticism* (2004), *Creativity and the Global Knowledge Economy* (2009), *Global Creation* (2010), and *Imagination* (2010).

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# Acknowledgements

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# Introduction

Creativity concentrates in particular societies and geographical regions and in specific historical periods. What explains this? Why is it that some societies and some historical eras are more creative than others are? Why are those societies or periods better at galvanizing the creativity of individuals than others? And why is it that our own age is less brilliant than others? *The Collective Imagination* tries to answer these questions by probing the media of the imagination, exploring the part played by paradox, antinomy and metaphor in acts of creation. Media such as these connect the unconnected. They unite opposites. In so doing, they ‘double’ images, thoughts, processes and deeds in uncanny, surprising and fertile ways. They make what is different, the same, and what is the same, different. In short, they make the impossible possible. That’s creation.

Acts of creation contribute immeasurably to the depth, dynamism and richness of social life. They produce social meaning and they replenish it when societies exhaust it as invariably happens. They animate scientific discovery and technological innovation. They nourish artistic insight and aesthetic pleasure. Conversely, creative media are socially conditioned and socially mobilized. So that the most startling acts of individual creativity are principally found in those periods, societies and institutions that exhibit a high propensity for inventiveness. *The Collective Imagination* examines the nature of the creative spirit – the collective generative agency – of free societies that delight in invention. It also analyses how the cultural cores of creative societies energize and animate economic, social, and political systems.

Modern high functioning arts-and-science-based economies perform by successfully capturing the patterns and paradoxes of human inventiveness. They turn these patterns and paradoxes into drivers of industrial development and social prosperity. When this happens, the imagination is transformed into an integral factor of production. Ingenuity becomes interwoven with the general sense of social well-being. *The Collective Imagination* explores the resulting scientific and aesthetic modes of production and the way in which these interact with economic, social and political systems. The point is made that it is particular kinds of societies and types of economies and forms of politics that lend themselves, on a collective scale, to the paradoxical shaping and synthesizing forces of the imagination.

*The Collective Imagination* begins by exploring the general character of the imagination. The imagination of individuals allows each one of us to integrate incongruent qualities. It allows us to make one common thing out of two things that are unlike each other. We discover similarities in difference. Imaginative thinking is oppositional. It unites opposing qualities into distinctive, socially-powerful and

coherent patterns, shapes and forms. And just as individuals have imaginations, so do societies. The power of imagination resonates in specific periods and places. Elizabethan London and late nineteenth century New York, Boston, and Chicago are classic examples. Wit exemplifies the collective imagination at work. Certain societies at certain times exhibit high levels of wit, irony, and paradox. From Classical Athens to the London of Chesterton and Churchill, the witty imagination is the classic marker of a creative society. In turn, a creative society is a free society. While free societies have many forms, all are sceptical of tyrannical thinking and behaviour. Whether tyranny is born of rationalism or irrationalism, the objection is the same. Tyrants, bores, and totalitarian dictators are the special target of the witty imagination.

Conversely, creative societies nurture personalities with a gift for creative doubling. These societies encourage social ‘acting’. Social actors create fictional identities. They wear inventive masks. They impersonate and parody themselves and others. Peak creative societies – the ones that produce a Plato or a Shakespeare – are dramaturgical in spirit. In these societies, truth is communicated indirectly. It is relayed by paradox and dialogue and irony. Such truths are enigmatic. They are mysterious. Yet they convey powerful appositional conclusions. Appositional thinking, the power to unite opposites in interesting and memorable ways, lies at the heart of creativity. Societies that are good at stimulating appositional thinking are creative. Appositional thinking is the rarest form of human cognition. The most common form is information. The second most common is explanation. We generate information analytically – by distinguishing objects in the world and attributing characteristics to them. Explanation, on the other hand, provides knowledge through discourse, narration, logic, rhetoric and other forms of discursive elaboration. Intellectual discovery in contrast relies on a third system of communication and cognition. This is the imagination. The imagination is rooted neither in analytic distinction nor systemic elaboration. Rather it relies on intuition and analogy.

The imagination waxes and wanes historically. It rises and falls as we move between societies. In short the social capacity to produce high levels of creative work varies across space and time. Often when a society is most voluble about creativity, it is least creative. Observing the nineteenth and twentieth centuries we see artistic and scientific creation grow and then shrink. There were some very remarkable art works produced in the early twentieth century. High Modernism in the arts, and quantum and relativistic physics, were very good. Yet the prevalence of kitsch art and kitsch science in the twentieth century, especially in the late twentieth century, underlines that the creative peak of the collective imagination is difficult to sustain. Kitsch is a good proxy for the absence of the imagination’s enigma. Albert Einstein once observed (1935/2007) that the ‘fairest thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion that stands at the cradle of all true art and true science’. Such an emotion (the emotion of enigma) is difficult to prolong. The power of the imagination, the capacity to think in ironies, appositions, analogies and other kinds of doubles, is sometimes socially

encouraged and sometimes not. When doubling in art and science falters, much more does as well. This is because we inhabit a world where the arts and the sciences are a force of production. While that coupling was widely commented on in the second-half of the twentieth century, it is ironic that the high point of the contribution of art and science to modern economies was probably 1870. Saying something is not the same as doing something.

Social creation varies over time. In modernity there is a pattern of long waves of expansion and contraction, creative peaks and abatements. Each of these waves tends to favour different cities and sometimes different nations. Such variability has a crucial economic significance. Modern economies flourish because of the application of art and science to economic processes. Yet there are productive periods and fallow periods, and better and worse places for the arts and sciences. This is reflected in institutions that sustain the arts and sciences, notably universities. Their quality rises and falls. In the latter half of the twentieth and on into the twenty-first century, it has been more a case of falling rather than rising. High-level creativity, discovery and invention contribute to industrial innovation and economic growth via the difficult medium of appositional thinking. Such thinking is not common-place, and when it wanes, economies flatten. The second half of the twentieth century was a period of massive expansion of universities globally, followed by much heated talk about industrial innovation and technological creation. Research universities and corporate science labs both claimed to change economic and social dynamics – and for the better. They both claimed to be the key to social prosperity. But the record of what they actually did was considerably more meagre.

While universities matter, of all of the social contexts of creativity, it is cities that matter most. Historically a handful of cities have been the key crucibles for the appositional thought and paradoxical irony that mediate the act of creation. These cities produce cultures rich in dramaturgy, wit, and analogical thought. They weave this in subtle ways into their material fabric and background ethos. Some of these cities are large, some are small; all have the capacity to surprise with their energy and drive. They do not always win popularity contests and their reputations to begin with are often rough hewn, garnering recognition for their works and achievements only with the passage of time. *The Collective Imagination* asks the question then: which contemporary cities have the greatest capacity for invention and discovery? Which cities structurally embody irony and paradox? Which ones are capable of antonymic works and analogical processes of the kind capable of sparking large and interesting economic and social leaps? In which places, today and tomorrow, is appositional thinking concentrated?

If the city is the natural home of creativity in general, nations are the peculiar locus of political creativity. Nations are the great purveyors of political ingenuity and political imbecility. Without good, great and interesting politics, not only nations but cities wither and waste away. Economies crumble and social prosperity fades. Thus *The Collective Imagination* concludes with a look at that most mysterious of all things, the creative political system. These are systems



that accommodate high levels of appositional thinking. Apposition, the mark of free societies, is partly a function of opposition. It is born of free-spirited debate, disagreement and contradiction. But like all acts of creation the interesting political system turns antonyms of opposition into synonyms of apposition. This is difficult to do – consequently unintended ironies abound in political life. What often passes for a free spirit in politics is actually out-and-out dogmatism. Self-declared liberals more often than not are conspicuously illiberal. Toleration is a cover for stifling control; manifestoes of openness are signs of closed minds. Talk of creativity is a sure-fire guarantee of being in the company of dim-wits. Only when irony becomes conscious, and political actors manage a gleam in their eye and turn opposition into apposition, is this reversed. Like imagination in general this is rare. But what is rare does exist. To its existence, we tip our hat.

