

# THE ROLE OF COMPLEXITY IN THE CREATIVE ECONOMY: CONNECTING IDEAS, PEOPLES AND PRACTICE

## Background Document

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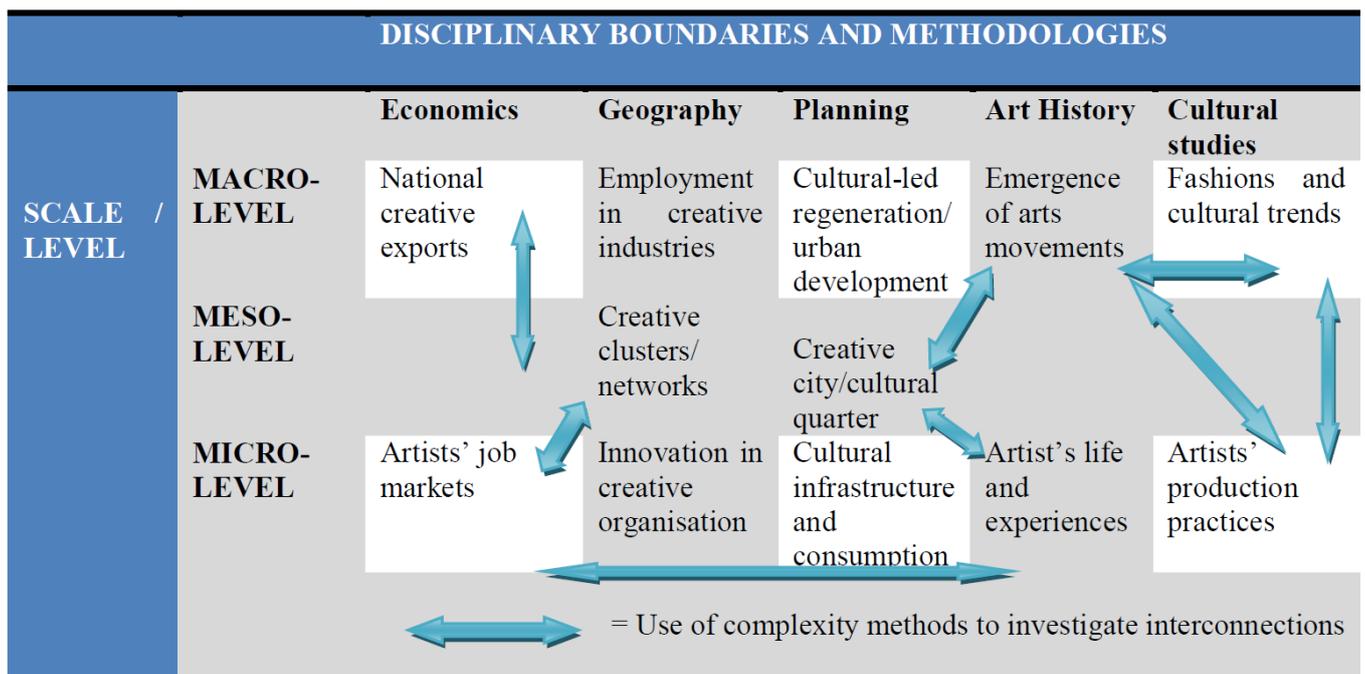
Complexity science has emerged in the last decades as a promising and powerful way of understanding a variety of systems, physical, biological, computational, social etc. It represents an approach to science, which sees that most phenomena or systems in the world cannot be understood without looking at their multiple interactions and interdependencies with other systems across different scales. Breaking with traditional reductionist approaches in science, complexity focuses on studying how diverse components and systems interact in space and time leading to the creation of new forms of order and organisation. Complexity theory is not a single unified theory, but constitutes a framework (and set of methodological approaches) for studying complex systems. Both in the natural and social sciences complexity has allowed for a more integrated understanding of phenomena and also for interrogating relational dynamics rather than single objects of research. As complexity science has started maturing, its policy relevance and influence has grown (e.g. OECD Report 2008, Geyer and Rihani, 2010, Johnson, 2010). However, despite an increasing body of research using complexity science in social sciences and the arts and humanities (e.g. Alexiou et al, 2009) there is still very little research focussed on understanding and supporting the creative economy (e.g. Comunian, 2010).

The creative economy has emerged recently as a broad research field concerned with the investigation of production and consumption systems (and practices) associated with cultural and creative products (including both material products and intangible productions such as events, traditions and cultural values). While definitions of the creative economy vary across countries (UNDP-UNCTAD, 2008), the field is truly multidisciplinary as it benefits from insights and research from geography, sociology, arts and humanities researchers as well as economics, cultural theorists and policy experts. However, due to this multidisciplinary nature, knowledge and understanding of the way the creative economy works is still very fragmented. Economists tend to be interested in exploring macro-level dynamics in productions and consumption, geographers tend to focus on clusters and urban interconnections (Chapain and Comunian, 2010), planners focus on how cultural and creative activities can support regeneration and urban development while arts and cultural theorist considers the value and meaning of ideas being generated within the cultural framework of specific social or historical contexts. While all of this research is valuable

within its own disciplinary boundaries, it often lacks relevance (and struggles to have an impact) in the broader understanding of the creative economy as a field of policy research or to make connections between the impact of micro-dynamics (such as the practice of an artist) and the role of meso-level (the operation of cultural and creative activities in cities and regions) and/or macro-level dynamics (such as the growth of certain market outputs at the national and international levels, see Potts et al. 2008).

The complexity approach can help overcome some of the constraints presented by disciplinary theoretical frameworks as it allows for the integration and combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies as well as practice-based research and therefore is in a position to create a multi-disciplinary framework which will be relevant to a variety of disciplines. Moreover, the complexity perspective is relevant in relation to the creative economy at different levels: looking at interactions between creative practitioners in designing products and processes, interactions between creative industries within local clusters or the role of cultural infrastructure within city and, at the macro level, the interaction between creative products and their global markets. It is also particularly relevant to the understanding of the connections between the creative economy and local and global communities from both a production and a consumption perspective. Figure 1 (in appendix) highlights the fragmented nature of our fields of investigation in researching the creative economy.

**Figure 1:** The role of complexity theory in crossing disciplinary and scale boundaries in the creative economy (the disciplines illustrated are only examples and the list of concepts and research topics is non exhaustive).



Complexity theory offers us the possibility to explore and understand the interconnections across the different levels of understanding of the creative economy (micro, meso and macro) as well as the possibility to integrate different disciplinary understandings and findings. As such, it would help to establish a more coherent framework for defining and understanding how the creative economy works, but also for exploring further the boundaries of the creative economy and its interconnection with communities, labour markets or social values. The main agents considered in this complex system will be ideas, peoples and practices (representing the agents and the set of relations and interactions taking place at the micro, meso and macro levels of the creative economy) and the focus will be in the interconnections of these different sets of agents across levels.

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