RSA
Events

TITLE: **Power to Create**

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NB

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Introduction

The RSA has always been a progressive organisation. We have been around for 260 years and, as the world has changed many times over, so has our account of progress and the contribution that we might make to it. Tonight I am speaking to the latest account, a new worldview and mission. We call it The Power to Create.

My argument is that we are at the cusp of an unprecedented opportunity: Powerful social and technological changes mean that we can now realistically commit to the aspiration that every citizen should live a creative life. But this major step in human progress will not happen unless we are able to identify and seek to remove the high barriers that currently stand in our way.

The creative life

So what do I mean by a creative life?

Creativity is a slippery concept. The first definition offered by Google is *'the use of imagination or new ideas to create something'*. Not only is this obviously circular but it begs the question; what is the something that has to be created to count as creativity.

For some people it is a quality belonging to certain activities; art, culture, design. Indeed the RSA argues strongly for the links between cultural flourishing and social and economic progress. For others the concept can be emptied of virtue as in 'creative accounting' or the job title given to people who use their undoubted talents to dream up advertising slogans.

But while we can't all make the contribution of artists or the income of advertising executives, there is one thing to which we can all aspire – to live creative lives; lives of which we are the author, lives which allow us to be the best people we can be.

What does such an aspiration mean for our opportunities and responsibilities? We have debated this fiercely among ourselves at the RSA and if the Power to Create gains any traction we would welcome a wider debate.

But let me give you my version to be going on with.

The first aspect of the creative life is individual freedom. As liberals say, as long as we are not directly inhibiting others we should be able to think our own thoughts, use our own words and make our own decisions. But as Amartya Sen and others have argued, creative freedom also involves resources. We talk about how savings, or educational qualifications or time, give us the freedom to pursue our choices. And we use a third idea of freedom. This refers to our capabilities and dispositions; we talk about people being free of drugs, free of mental illness, free from a narrow or fundamentalist worldview. Do we have the knowledge, attitude, and temperament to be free?

Freedom makes the creative life possible but our choices determine whether we fulfil that possibility. It is not a state that can be achieved but a continuous process of building a life which is unique and meaningful.

So, prizing creativity means honouring the individual. But we must never imagine that a creative life can be realised apart from our existence as social beings. As Richard Rorty has written:

'We are only individuals in as much as we are social. None of us has a self to be faithful to except the one which has been cobbled together in interchanges with parents and siblings, friends and enemies, churches and governments'.

Our creations – a business, an artistic performance, a social movement, a product, a service, an idea, or simply an act of generosity – are only possible because of the people around us. It is not just individuals that we describe as being more or less creative but organisations, places, societies.

We think of creativity being the fount of high culture, but culture – in the broader sense of the values, expectations and norms that pervade state, market and community - are critical determinants of a society's our creative capacity. Thus to prize creativity as a substantive virtue urges our commitment to a society in which this prize is realistically attainable not just for ourselves but for our fellow citizens.

The Power to Create combines an idealistic view of human flourishing with democratic inclusiveness. As Roberto Unger said last year on this stage:

the true goal of progressives must be now, as it was in the 19th century, a larger life for the ordinary man and woman

Yet from Aristotle to the Victorians, philosophers and social commentators with an ambitious, high minded, idea of the good life well lived have also tended to be elitists, assuming that such an ideal was beyond the capabilities of the masses. But all human beings have the capacity to be the authors of their own lives. Meaning-making is what marks us out as a species. We are born with the muscles for creativity, muscles that grow with the exercise of self-determination.

In short, the Power to Create asserts that all citizens can and should live creative lives

A creativity tipping point?

So this is our vision. Is there any reason to believe the Power to Create is anything other than a distant aspiration, a star to navigate by but not yet a road to follow? We believe there is. We believe we are reaching a point at which the possibility of, and the need for, a creative citizenry loom before us and present us with urgent choices. This moment of inflection is the result of a set of interconnected changes leading to a step change in both the demand for and supply of creativity in modern society.

The first changes are around human capability and appetite. In all our breast-beating about the failings of our education system we can forget just how much more educated today's citizens are. In less than two generations we have gone from under 10% to almost half of young people experiencing higher education. And while we might lag behind other countries in some areas, our young people are in the top quartile of developed nations when it comes to problem solving ability.

Despite the many pressures they face, today's young people are critiquing narrow materialism in an, arguably, more nuanced and concrete way than their grandparents' attempts in the sixties. RSA research shows more young people than ever before wanting the autonomy of owning their own business even though the returns and security are often lower than a traditional job, and among those opting for employment a growing proportion say they make decisions influenced by the values and ethical practices of employers.

More broadly, a set of intertwined factors including rising affluence, a decline in the importance of tradition and deference, exposure of modern citizens through travel, immigration and the media to different cultures, are all leading to more people in the developed world aspiring to what the World Values Survey calls 'self-expression'.

Technology is the second great engine of change. In its wake many barriers to creative expression and enterprise have come tumbling down.

The internet has led to a quantum leap in affordable easy access to key tools of creativity: learning, communicating, trading and collaborating.

Its pioneers thought the world wide web would be primarily a tool for the exchange of information among experts, but when the financial and other costs of generating and sharing content started to fall a massive global appetite was revealed. In music, films, photographs, blogs, apps, social networks hundreds of millions of people generated content - the overwhelming majority of it for free.

Following in the footsteps of pioneers like Wikipedia and Linux, again and again the creation of new, free or inexpensive, easy to use platforms released waves of human creativity, entrepreneurial aspiration and collaborative endeavour. For example: New innovation platforms like Innocentive are inviting people to design and invent – activities which once felt like the preserve of an expert elite - open now to anyone whether working alone or as part of fluid international network of co-collaborators. Etsy has opened up the world's markets to craft workers. Kickstarter provides access to capital to inventors of every kind and is encouraging ever more people to become active, engaged investors in other people's

creative ideas. Fast growing platform Patreon enables people to invest in their favourite up and coming artists.

Peer to peer and sharing economy platforms whether social enterprises like Freecycle and Streetbank or commercial like AirBnB enable anyone to trade or exchange, blurring the boundaries between buyer and seller, profit making and sharing. Human trust and reciprocity is as important as digital algorithms to the success of these platforms.

In our wonderment at the pace of innovation we must resist technological determinism. The internet of invention and cultural self-expression is also the internet of porn, hate and trivia. Technology can and is used to reduce autonomy and dull creativity. Indeed as technology becomes ever more central to our identities we need to have a much more explicitly political debate about who controls it and for what purpose.

Nevertheless, in aggregate across a wide spectrum of human activity greater creativity is being enabled and encouraged. The network economics are exponential: the demand for creativity drives supply, the supply of creativity drives demand and new platforms drive both.

And the impact of this radical, social technology – has barely even begun. The first generation for whom it has been a part of the fabric their entire lives are now reaching adulthood. The social web, pervasive not just in terms of connectivity but an intrinsic part of modern identity will change the town hall, Whitehall, the school, the business, the social enterprise and international relations in ways which we cannot yet conceive let alone adapt to. In short, the internet has the capacity to be the most powerful accelerator of creativity in human history.

Also, the relationship between creativity on and off line is unpredictable but largely positive. The music industry feared downloading would obliterate its profits instead is has transformed its business model. We consume much more music and people who might have spent money to listen now spend it to be part of the experience at concerts and festivals. From computer aided design to making technologies like 3D printing, new technology is making it easier and easier to turn ideas into material products. The RSA is seeking to at act as a hub for the ever-growing makers movement in the UK, something that often combines cutting edge technology with old craft methods.

All around the world people are using the net to seek out new routes to personal development, connection, and self-expression. And it turns out that we need this appetite. The new demands we make on citizens represent the third trend that might take us to a creativity tipping point.

Take the CBI's definition of employability as *the ability to work in a team; a willingness to demonstrate initiative and original thought; self-discipline in starting and completing tasks'*. Various factors including the accelerating pace of change in markets, the need for continuous innovation, the expectation of more personalised service and the growing appetite for authenticity and emotional connection in products and services; all increase the premium on the capacity of employees to be creative and self-motivated. In the search for new insights and products more companies are also acknowledging and encouraging consumer-led innovation.

The rise of intelligent robots has led pessimistic and optimistic commentators to predict respectively either massive unemployment or a world of leisure. Such predictions have been made and confounded before.

A more likely outcome is a further restructuring of labour markets and market values with consumers and service users putting a greater premium on the creative, affective touches that only human engagement can bring. Let the robots do the robotic work, let humans flourish creatively.

And increasingly the Government too wants creative citizens. The mid-twentieth century model of industrial production - Fordism as it sometimes called - emphasised standardised forms of mass production delivered through large centralised organisations. The modern welfare state was built on largely the same principles but as the weaknesses of that model emerged, as many social needs have grown or become more intractable, and as economic crises have spawned waves of public sector austerity, we have come to see that the model of a paternalistic state delivering uniform services to a passive undifferentiated citizenry is neither progressive nor practical.

Conservative local authorities might refer to the Big Society, Labour ones to the idea of the co-operative council but whatever the label forward thinking public agencies are reaching a radical conclusion. Their citizens and communities are not just bundles of need; they are also huge untapped assets. Methods of service co-design and co-delivery are being pursued again blurring the boundary between professional and client. Initiatives like Homeshare and Shared Lives are modern examples of an old ideal - reciprocal civic relationships offering an alternative or adjunct to public services. Encouraged by the principle of payment by results there is a growth in social enterprise. The world of policy and service innovation used to be largely closed, now big data can potentially enable anyone with the time and inclination to spot trends, test hypotheses and develop

solutions.

Of course, huge challenges like caring for an ageing population, tackling inequality or responding to climate change require concerted action at national, local and international level, but our strategies will also require an adaptive and creative citizenry with the skills and confidence to develop its own solutions.

The barriers to a creative society

A better educated, more self-expressive population, the impact of technology and the demand for new attributes in workers and citizens: these are all the factors taking us towards a society in which we can all hope live what Unger calls a larger life. But the potential tipping point might not be reached. Because there is another side to this story. The barriers to a society of creative possibility.

Culture has a vital and independent significance. It can motivate or de-motivate. This is the first barrier. In our culture the idea that everyone can and should live creatively is not yet accepted as an aspiration let alone a practical imperative. We can see this, for example, in the relatively low priority given to autonomy, engagement and motivation in assessing the value of education and employment. 43% of the workforce, thirteen million people in the UK report that they aren't using their potential and skills at work.

It is not that we don't see living a creative life as a good thing, nor that anyone appears not to want it for themselves. In a style reminiscent of resistance to earlier movements for improvements in universal rights or entitlements, the measures necessary to achieve greater autonomy and

fulfilment for all are opposed on the implicit grounds that those at the top should be able preserve their privileges and opportunities while the rest show no sign of wanting their lives of docile subservience to be disturbed by higher aspirations.

A concrete symbol of limited commitment toward the ideal of creative lives for all is the persistence of educational privilege and inter-generational inequality ('the past devouring the future' in Thomas Picketty's memorable phrase). The point is not inequality per se, but that the concentration of wealth and opportunity means key resources that foster creative aspirations and choices are not distributed in the way most likely to maximise the benefits to society as a whole. If we judge social progress by the scale of human creativity extreme inequality is deeply inefficient.

Not only is capital concentrated in certain strata of the population it is concentrated in assets –like London house values - that do little to expand people's creative possibilities. Many studies have shown that access to relatively small amounts of capital can have a much greater impact on people's sense of efficacy and opportunity than increases in income, yet a quarter of our adult population effectively have no capital and one of the first casualties of austerity were policies – the child trust fund and the savings gateway – explicitly designed to address this deficit.

The idea that one class is simply by its nature bound to rule another is seen as reactionary and even offensive but the assumption that only a certain strata of people, of learners, of workers, of places can be expected to be creative endures.

Whatever its implications the most radical element of the Power to Create

is the idea itself.

For the reasons I outlined earlier the idea that the creative life is something only for an elite is being questioned, but so long and so deep has that assumption held sway it is deeply inscribed into our society's institutions. In one way of another we spend most of our lives working in or with, or sometimes against, institutions. And it is their working practices – what I describe as sorting, splitting and subordinating - that represent a second major barrier to the Power to Create.

Sorting is the assumption that only a certain number of roles within the institution can be creative - in the sense of allowing and expecting autonomy, voluntary engagement and fulfilment - and that an essential role of management systems is to sort posts and people into a pyramidical structure with the most creative jobs at or near the top.

Sorting is also a core purpose - for some, the core purpose - of most education institutions. The ultimate goal of formal education should surely be to inculcate and sustain a love of learning and to guide young people into finding the areas in which they can most fully and successfully express themselves to the wider benefit of society. Instead we have a system which prizes one set of intellectual attributes forces young people to focus on these attributes and then sorts students by whether or not they are deemed to possess them.

Part of our creativity lies in the plurality of our social existence. A second institutional habit - splitting - involves institutions allocating people a role and separating this from the other multiple roles they occupy. We sometimes talk about the different interests of public service workers -

teachers, police officers, care workers - and public service consumers - parents, citizens, clients. But, of course, teachers are parents, police officers are citizens and most care workers will at some time or another find themselves or a loved one needing care.

This phenomenon is also prevalent in the private sector. Workers whether on the factory floor, the shop counter or in an office are motivated by a pride in what they are producing. It is something they would happily use as well produce, buy as well as sell. In contrast, think of the financial services sector where for decades workers were incentivised to sell poor products on the basis of misleading information. When the only way to cope at work is to leave your values and human sympathies at home in the morning it is not surprising that people feel demoralised and jaded. When LSE anthropologist David Graeber published an article last year arguing that most occupations – starting with his friend the high powered corporate lawyer – comprised what he called bullshit jobs it went viral.

Splitting is particularly prevalent in institutions displaying subordination, a process identified by Max Weber, bureaucracy's first and greatest analyst. He identified the distinction between an institution's substantive (real world, value-based) goals and its procedural (bureaucratic, rule-based) goals. Weber observed that organisations over time tend to subordinate the former to the latter.

A similar process can be observed in corporations created and built by proud entrepreneurs, engineers, designers with a market-beating service or product but which subsequently become obsessed by size or shareholder returns. John Kay cites ICI as a business that was highly successful while its goal was to be a world class chemicals company but

which soon crashed after it changed its goal and strategy, explicitly subordinating everything to the maximisation of shareholder returns.

Subordination also happens in organisations that claim to be operating in the public interest. Instead of enabling their employees to overcome the inherent tensions between short-term organisational interests and public duty, institutions tend to subordinate the latter to the former. The Police Federation provided a classic, newsworthy example. The hard won moment a few weeks ago when the Fed accepted in full recommendations crafted by the RSA and in doing so grasped that the interests of the police must be brought into alignment with those of the public was the moment when it became possible again to tap into the creative capacities of its staff and activists.

Most large organisations are trying to grapple with these institutional habits and their impact on their capacity to recruit, retain and motivate creative employees. Organisations talk about the need to be devolved, agile, mission driven. There are institutions – from the twelve companies highlighted by Frederic Laloux in his book Reinventing Organisations to charities like the Women's Institute or the Scouts – which have shown the willingness to think and work in different, more creative, ways. But there are too few examples because the systems that drive institutions – from financial markets to Government funding regimes – are still as likely to incentivise the wrong practices as the right ones.

Exclusive assumptions and organisational conventions are barriers to more people living more creatively but what about a third, even more fundamental block. Advocates of the Power to Create need to have something to say about the kind of social and economic context in which

creativity is most likely to be a realistic path for the most people. And, given that it is a core function of Government in a democracy to enable everyone to be able to participate fully in society, this final barrier takes us to the role of the state.

As a goal, creative lives for all leads to a profound reconsideration of the role and working methods of government. In some areas the state would do more than today's in others less.

Greater activism is needed in shaping the market and its outcomes. The creative state would ensure open markets with low barriers of entry and diverse forms of ownership; encourage and enforce permissive intellectual property regimes, demand that utilities and essential services – including the global internet giants - are run with the public interest at heart, invest in tomorrow's infrastructure (including new institutions which foster and grow innovation). As Eric Beinhocker and Nick Hanauer have recently argued, the greatest achievements of capitalism lie less in economic growth or profit but in helping find solutions to problems that matter to us. Now we need a new partnership between modern Government and enlightened business to help us solve the problem of people locked out of the possibility of a creative life.

On the other hand, the governors of the state – particularly the central state - need to be aware that its scale, complexity and accountability often make it badly suited to human scale interventions.

The pace of change and growing interdependencies of the modern world mean that more policy challenges - such as youth unemployment or meeting care needs - are highly complex; 'wicked problems' as they are

sometimes called. Today's citizens - aspiring to greater self-determination - want a state that enables them to feel self-reliant not one which creates and reinforces dependency. At the RSA we have argued for the principle of social productivity, which is that public sector interventions should be judged by the degree to which they enable individuals and communities better to contribute to meeting their own needs.

The creative society would also, of course, seek to devolve power to the lowest effective level not just because the centre is too distant but because we would encourage different places to do things in substantively different ways, not just experiments in service delivery but experiments in place shaping, indeed experiments in living.

More profoundly the values and analysis behind the Power to Create encourages a questioning of the very idea of traditional policy making.

The success of most social policy interventions – the interventions that could help foster mass creativity - rely on what academic and former Canadian cabinet secretary Jocelyne Bourgon calls 'civic effects' that is the public engagement, mobilisation and behaviour change. But these civic effects are more likely to emerge from political leaders articulating a clear vision, convening new conversations and collaborations, leading by doing than through the slow, cumbersome process of developing and implementing policy. When it comes to social policy, politicians and managers need to replace the blunt tools of policy making with those of design, in which continuous experimentation, learning by failing, co-producing with consumers and users is the norm. This, of course has major implications for our systems of law making and accountability.

Towards the creative society

A few months ago I sent a very early version of this speech – most of which is long since discarded – to my old friend the writer and social innovator Charles Leadbeater. In his diplomatic but frank response he used a phrase that stuck in my mind. Having studied private, public and third sector organizations for many years Charlie has concluded that the most effective comprise in his words 'creative communities with a cause'. Nicely for us this echoes and develops the view of a previous RSA chair Charles Handy who said "a good business is a community with a purpose".

The road to a more creative society will be crazy-paved with changes large and small, but that road will only be laid because our society as a whole is capable of progress. For what Charlie says of organisations is true of places and societies. They too must be 'Creative communities with a cause'.

Creativity as I have argued this evening is an essential part of the mix but it does not flourish in a vacuum. 'Community' points to the importance of an open, trusting, collaborative culture where different people with different backgrounds values, and attributes mix easily with each other. Research suggests social trust to be more powerfully correlated with economic dynamism than levels of tax, regulation or education. And the idea of 'a cause' echoes my point about the kinds of institutional and political leadership which inspires and fosters a creative citizenry; leadership that it visionary, authentic, open and accountable in relation to goals.

Whatever the following winds of change, the Power to Create requires a form of leadership that can restore our lost faith in social progress. The RSA guards its independence closely, but in the run up to the General

Election we will be doing all we can to get the political parties to talk more about the possibilities of the future, the important choices we face, the kind of leadership we need and deserve.

Conclusion

The impact of the RSA's mission, Power to Create does not lie in a definition, a statement or – sadly – a speech. It will depend on the focused ideas and action of this great Society. Looking back through our history – from the country's first public art exhibition in the 18th century, to arguing for children to go to school rather than up chimneys in the 19th century, to creating vocational qualifications in the 20th century, the RSA has always been in the business of expanding the Power to Create. But we've only ever made a difference by reaching out. These are not ideas we claim to own or want to protect but something to share and grow. Whether you an active Fellow of the RSA or someone whose only involvement has been watching an on-line lecture, my invitation to you is to help us develop our ideas and their practical applications.

Help us make the RSA the kind of institution that exemplifies the Power to Create.

Matthew Taylor

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