

Book Reviews...

Rudge, P. (2021). *Beyond the Blue Economy: Creative industries and sustainable development in small island developing states*. London: Routledge/Taylor & Francis. ISBN 978-0367-82025-1 (hbk) Amazon £120. ISBN 978-1-003-01151-4 (ebk) Amazon £33.29

A book with this title will undoubtedly provoke interest amongst readers in Seychelles, where the banner of the Blue Economy flies high. Does it make sense to be looking ‘beyond’ this aspiration when we’re not even there yet? The answer is that the world hardly stands still and the author is right to encourage us to question where we are and what lies ahead. Regardless of the merits of the Blue Economy, he warns that we should be cautious about its wholesale adoption; even if it does have the safety tag of sustainability, the impact of any new development in and around the sea carries with it environmental risks. Moreover, reliance on the ocean has not been enough so far for small island states to ward off economic troubles arising from an over-dependence on a limited number of activities. So, who can gainsay his argument that we should look elsewhere too?

Peter Rudge is an experienced practitioner as well as an academic, whose career has been spent working in different aspects of the cultural and creative industries. In the course of his travels, he has taken a special interest in small island states, and has looked not only to examples in the Indian Ocean but also the Caribbean and Pacific. One feature that these places have in common is an over-reliance on a narrow range of economic activities, especially tourism, which is often the main source of income. As the recent and ongoing pandemic has shown – although natural disasters and financial crises have provided earlier warnings – it leaves them seriously exposed to any fall in visitor numbers. New ways, he argues, should be found to diversify their respective economies. This is a timely book which Rudge started writing before the first cases of Covid-19, not knowing then how soon his argument would be so dramatically vindicated.

At the heart of the text is the author’s belief that it is not the cultural and creative industries in a traditional sense which can make the kind of difference that is needed, so much as the impact of digitalization. It is this which can open new opportunities for innovation with a reach that can go well beyond island boundaries to all parts of the world. For once-remote small island states, the global economy is now accessible in a way that was never before possible. Distance is no longer a problem, remoteness no longer an issue. Digitalization can

offer new sources of revenue and contribute to economic diversification; it should be, as he says, ‘front and centre’ of a radically different approach.

It all sounds very enticing and newcomers to the subject will first want to learn what digitalization can bring to traditional activities such as film production, music making, art and architecture. What will be different and where is the added value? Part of Rudge’s explanation is that new technologies – such as immersive content, 5G and blockchain – have opened fresh possibilities for production and distribution. Not only that, but with the near-universal use of constantly-updated devices, the whole process has become vastly more accessible. Moreover, as he illustrates, the range of applications is sufficient to attract a new generation of entrepreneurs who were not lured to the same extent by traditional activities:

Computer games design and production, film and television production, digital design, visual effects and immersive technology are the key drivers of the explosion of creative industries as a global economic force.

Significantly, the field is attracting young people on a scale previously unimaginable. For small island states, where employment in staple industries like tourism and hospitality, fishing and farming, has not greatly appealed to many in this age group, the new item on the menu can change the balance. The author points out that the creative and cultural industries can employ more young people than any other sector and contribute more to GDP than a country-wide average. Combine that with an intuitive interest, from an early age, in ICT and you have a potent mix. For governments concerned with youth unemployment – whether because there are not enough jobs or, in the case of Seychelles, because school leavers and those in their twenties have not been enthused by the choice previously on offer – the response should be clear. Building an economy based on activities that will excite a new generation of job-seekers is surely the way to go.

But for all the arguments in favour of investing in a digitalized network of cultural and creative activities, the way ahead for a small island state is by no means straightforward. As in so many fields, the Western nations have a head start. Apart from easier access to finance, there are two other factors which can facilitate the growth of this sector. One is the inter-relationship of government, industry and universities (referred to as the ‘triple helix’) which, if effective, should be designed to encourage innovation. But the crucial word is ‘if’, and even in Western economies universities are often slow to transform their own outmoded practices to support new opportunities. A second factor is the value of having large enough clusters of population, where like-minded innovators – often, but by no means always, graduates – can interact and be stimulated by the changes taking place around them.

Clusters can provide a real force for change, Silicon Valley being the iconic example. That kind of development enables the co-location of a mix of small businesses and entrepreneurs,

prepared to put up with sometimes cramped accommodation in return for being in the same building or street as other movers and shakers. As a creative environment, the potential is enormous. Governments may offer seed money but otherwise are not encouraged to intervene. Around the world, one can find small neighbourhoods where this is happening. In London, for instance, just outside the north-eastern boundary of the City of London, the district of Shoreditch formerly provided services, like office equipment and bookbinding, for the nearby finance houses. Now it is teeming with young entrepreneurs, many of whom live and work close to each other in converted accommodation. Creativity is a common theme and most of what is produced can be found on a personal mobile. New businesses, born of innovation, are proliferating. Walk around Shoreditch and signs of the emerging economy are everywhere displayed. Dice, for instance, is the name of a ticketing service that is described as a music lover's dream, enabling the purchase with no booking fees of often 'sold-out' tickets; while, nearby, JukeDeck uses artificial intelligence to compose and adapt music to meet different needs, and goes a step further with machine learning so that it can be improved over time. Coffee houses are popular venues to meet or even to work on a laptop, and the area has also become a favourite venue for street food, adding to its vibrant atmosphere. Places such as Shoreditch are natural breeding grounds for growth and could well be adapted to different cultural settings. But they cannot easily be replicated, relying instead on spontaneity to produce a productive mix.

Because of the limits of critical mass, small island states are at a disadvantage. Clusters are not easily formed and, in the case of Seychelles, it is disappointing that two schemes to encourage business start-ups and the sharing of ideas, have both come to very little. Espace, in central Victoria, was an ambitious venture, specifically designed to help young people get started, but it now accommodates conventional offices. Likewise, a government-sponsored scheme for small enterprises in the industrial district of Providence is also losing its way. In both cases, misplaced government intervention has a lot to answer for.

In spite of local difficulties, such as the above, the ideas surrounding digitalization are undoubtedly seductive and the author's enthusiasm is infectious. For a reviewer, though, a couple of questions need to be asked. One is whether the wider changes to date are sufficient to merit the status of the Fourth Industrial Revolution; or is it still a case of work in progress? The other question is whether the Blue Economy is necessarily as damaging to the ocean environment as the author suggests.

To deal, first, with how progress so far should be regarded, the First Industrial Revolution was heralded by the invention of the steam engine, and the second saw the application of oil and electricity. Through associated advances in technology, both of these stages of economic history led to fundamental changes in society, which is why they were 'revolutionary'. Then, from the last quarter of the twentieth century, the start of the mass use of computers and the

ubiquitous presence of the internet was to transform the whole nature of communication, giving rise to what is understandably described as the Information Age, the Third Industrial Revolution. Clearly, there is a new wave of change underway now, but it is not clear yet whether this amounts to significantly more than a speeding-up and extension of existing processes. Will it prove to be transformative in the same way as earlier social and economic revolutions? At this stage, one cannot be sure whether it represents more than a new phase of the Information Age, noteworthy though that is in itself? The next few years will give a better idea of what is still to emerge.

Of more immediate interest in Seychelles is whether the changes that Rudge champions should be at the expense of the Blue Economy or in addition. Is it a question of 'either/or', or can they be complementary? It is something of a truism to argue that any form of development of the ocean represents an environmental intrusion that has the potential to undermine sustainability targets. But doing nothing is not an option. The ocean is hardly pristine as it is, and part of a Blue Economy strategy must be to redress past wrongs as well, to prevent them occurring again. The very essence of this approach is to use the ocean more sustainably in the future than has been done so far. Making greater use of the ocean and its vast resources need not *per se* be detrimental to targets such as the UN's global sustainability goals. At various points in his book, Rudge is sceptical about the ability of the Blue Economy to fulfil its own principles, but he is absolutely right when he asserts that 'it cannot be seen as the only driver of socio-economic development'. A way has to be found to move ahead on two fronts.

The future for small island states will surely be a mix of sustainable activities on land and at sea. On land, if Rudge is correct, there will be a surge of innovation and the start of new businesses, including many based on the potential of 'the Fourth Industrial Revolution'. At sea, present and new activities must all be fed through the sieve of sustainability; there will be more regulations, but for the benefit of all. If this kind of balance can be struck, the future of small island states will be more promising than it presently is. The economy of countries like Seychelles will be less vulnerable and the choice of employment more attractive than in the past. It is a fast-moving subject that goes to the heart of so many aspects of small island states and cannot easily be dismissed. For those who wish to engage in this important area of exploration, Rudge's book is essential reading.

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