

Geoff Mulgan: Ideas

I've been involved in developing a wide range of ideas over the last two decades. In every case I have been as much a vehicle as an originator, and very much the beneficiary of great collaborators. Here are a few quick summaries of some of the ideas that still excite me most.

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CREATIVE INDUSTRIES AND CREATIVE CITIES

My first job put me in an interesting role – working out how to connect economic policy to the arts and creative industries. I helped draft London’s first cultural industries strategy which was published in 1985 and shaped the investment strategy of the then Greater London Enterprise Board. A lot of what it contained was ahead of its time – including recommendations on using a much wider range of investment tools; creating digital channels for creative industries; shared platforms to allow smaller independents to sell, and so on. The book ‘Saturday night or Sunday morning: from arts to industry’ (co-authored with Ken Worpole) set out much of the thinking and then went on to influence many cities as they developed cultural and creative quarters.

I also worked with Charles Landry to set up the creative cities network in the 1990s – that connected pioneers such as Helsinki and Barcelona. Later that decade many of these ideas moved into the mainstream, popularised and developed by figures like Richard Florida in the US.

All around the world cities have developed creative clusters and quarters; incubators; funds; flagship buildings and projects; tax reliefs for arts areas. Some worked well, but too many just copied others, rather than being tailored to specific strengths and histories.

One of the interesting projects Nesta has done recently is a [manifesto for the creative economy](#) – rethinking priorities for an era when a rising proportion of cultural consumption comes through digital networks. Many of our current programmes – such as the [Digital R&D Fund for the Arts](#) – point to where the field needs to go next.

LIBERATION TECHNOLOGY AND MODERNISING DEMOCRACY

I’ve consistently been involved in the use of network technologies to transform democracy. I’m fascinated by the potential for spreading power, but also aware that simplistic hopes that networks would replace hierarchies have proven ill-founded. My written outputs in this space have included some theoretical work (eg in the Demos collection on ‘liberation technology’, and in my book ‘Connexity’).

I’ve also been involved in the practice, for example through the charity Involve (of which I was the first chair). My book ‘Good and Bad Power’ provides a theoretical account of what makes power good, and the many ways in which governance arrangements can be transformed making the most of technologies. A lot of hot air has been issued on this topic – mainly from a naïve belief that technologies automatically empower people. As I showed in my book ‘Communication and control: networks and the new economies of communication’, they empower both the people in networks and the people with power in existing hierarchies. They can

strengthen both the rebels in Tahrir Square and the traditional authorities, both small startups and big firms like GE or Microsoft. Through 2014 and 2015 Nesta is leading a European consortium developing new democratic platforms – D-CENT. This can't answer the bigger issues – but it will push the boundaries of how technology can reinvent democracy.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE 'OTHER INVISIBLE HAND'

I coined the idea of the 'other invisible hand' to describe the work of civil society, and its dependence on the right laws and structures. Some of the thinking was set out in the Demos report 'The Other Invisible Hand' (co-written with Charles Landry). I later set up the government's review of charity law (under the Strategy Unit) which led to the adoption of a public benefit test for all charities and new legal forms (notably the Community Interest Company, which has subsequently prompted equivalents in many other countries). I chaired the Carnegie Inquiry into the Future of Civil Society which reported in 2010 – and focused, in particular, on the role of civil society in the economy, on the media and democracy. I hope that some of its ideas were a bit ahead of their time, and at Nesta we've been able to take some of them forward with our [Destination Local](#) programme supporting innovative models of hyperlocal media.

SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

I've been closely involved in the social enterprise and entrepreneurship field for twenty years. I commissioned Charles Leadbeater's seminal report 'The Rise of the Social Entrepreneur' at Demos in 1995, and had a close involvement in initiatives such as the School for Social Entrepreneurs and the Community Action Network. Michael Young – who Harvard's Daniel Bell rated the world's most successful ever social entrepreneur from the 1950s to the 2000s – became a mentor for me.

Within government I shaped UK government social enterprise strategy from 1997 onwards (some of this is summarised in my chapter for Alex Nicholls book 'Social Entrepreneurship' published by OUP). With Robin Murray I wrote a report on social venturing; with a group of colleagues another one on scaling social innovations and enterprises (I've subsequently used the framework in this to help dozens of social enterprises think through their strategic options).

I was a great enthusiast of social entrepreneurship in the 1990s but felt the field slightly lost its way. The best social entrepreneurs are steely but humble. But some of the best funded organisations in the field started promoting a rather over the top ideology in which extraordinary heroic individuals single-handedly transform the world. This was bad analysis and bad history (for example, not many social entrepreneurs saw their ideas go to scale – much more often others took over at crucial points). It led to too much glitz and self-promotion, rather than honesty and learning. And it also turned the heads of some of the best people, and left them

circulating on the international conference circuit rather than doing good. I wrote a piece for the RSA in 2011 which set out this diagnosis in more detail.

STRATEGY IN GOVERNMENT

My work in the UK government led to a growing interest in systematic strategy – and a belief that the public sector needs different methods from those in use in the military and business. The work at the strategy unit showed that there was very little good material available, and so I commissioned development of better tools. Some of these were summarised in my book ‘The Art of Public Strategy’ and applied in subsequent work with governments around the world including Australia, Singapore, France, UAE, Canada, China and Japan, and the creation of a loose network of strategy units across the world.

I remain convinced that governments badly need help in serving the long-term, and that there are many options for doing this better, from new structures and institutions, through better processes and tools to change cultures. Much of this has to be led from the top. But it can be embedded into the daily life of a department or Cabinet.

JOINED UP GOVERNMENT

I coined the phrase ‘joined up government’ (in a speech for Tony Blair) and promoted the use of more horizontal structures in government, including pooled budgets, shared targets, cross-cutting policy and delivery teams, cross-cutting training programmes, local partnerships, data sharing and other devices. These ideas were developed at Demos in the mid-1990s (some collected in various reports on ‘holistic government’). A summary of how governments have implemented these ideas (in the UK, Finland, US, Singapore and elsewhere), and how they could be taken further, is contained in ‘The Art of Public Strategy’. I still see this as unfinished business. Governments can and should go much further in integrating horizontal and vertical structures. Surprisingly few use even well-proven methods. So there is no excuse for being trapped in vertical silos. In early 2014 I put out a draft paper suggesting how the centres of government could be better organised.

SOCIAL INNOVATION AND SIX

In the second half of the 2000s I became heavily involved in the development of a social innovation field worldwide, partly building on the example of Michael Young. This included a series of pieces of theory – including reports published by Said Business School, the OECD, the European Commission and others.

From our base in the Young Foundation we created SIX – the social innovation exchange – which now links over 8000 people and organisations worldwide, and holds a great series of conferences, telepresences and other events (much of this

done with the late Diogo Vasconcelos). Around the world the past five years have seen the spread of a network of social innovation centres, funds and hubs; lots of work with governments and business on how to better support social innovation; and a steadily advancing 'craft' knowledge of how best to nurture ideas.

One of my favourite outputs from all of this was the 'Open Book of Social Innovation' (written with Robin Murray and Julie Simon), which tried to document hundreds of methods in use around the world and put them into a coherent framework. Some of the theory is summarised in essays I wrote for recent books - Social Innovation from Palgrave (edited by Alex Nicholls and Alex Murdoch); and Challenge Social Innovation (from Springer).

This is a field that is bubbling with energy and ideas – and truly global in nature, with pioneers all over the world, from India to Colombia, Brazil to Korea.

PUBLIC SECTOR INNOVATION

A parallel body of work has looked at how governments can innovate, an interest of mine since my very first job in the government of London. In the early 2000s I co-authored a Cabinet Office paper on public sector innovation, and, a few years later, a Nesta provocation ([Ready or Not](#)). Throughout this time I have done a lot of talks and training for governments. The main aim has been to get away from the standard approach of public organisations – conferences with a few inspiring speakers, a handful of random methods injected into the normal administration, but nothing resembling a strategic approach. That's why I've emphasised the practical details of management – how to generate ideas and draw them in; how to prototype; how to embed; how to finance; how to scale.

Current Nesta work with Bloomberg Philanthropy is providing a useful empirical analysis of [I-teams](#) around the world and in early 2014 we'll publish a synthesis of our views on public innovation.

SOCIAL IMPACT BONDS

As part of that work I was involved in developing specific tools, for example for incubators and accelerators; models like social innovation camps (the SI Camp model has now been widely used worldwide). I also coined the term 'Social impact bonds' – the idea of creating an investment vehicle for social value. This drew on previous work on using investment tools for social goals, such as a working group on creating a 'green book' for investment in people in early 2000s.

The first SIB was implemented by the organisation Social Finance in Peterborough. Various Young Foundation reports analysed both the potential for SIBs and the complexity of their effective implementation. A chapter assessing progress and next steps will be published in 2014.

STUDIO SCHOOLS

In the mid-2000s, reflections on the failure of some recent educational policies led to the development of the idea of Studio Schools (with important inputs from Therese Rein, the founder of Ingeus, and Simon Tucker at the Young Foundation). The central idea was to redesign schooling with non-cognitive skills at the core of the school experience, and a return to the renaissance ideal of integrating work and learning.

Many discussions with teachers, pupils and employers led to the basic design principles being established: small schools, most of the curriculum to be done through practical projects with outside partners and clients; coaches as well as teachers for the pupils; organisation of the timetable and buildings to be more like a workplace than a traditional school. This approach was then piloted on a small scale in Luton and Blackpool. The very strong results – in particular on GCSEs, the standard exam for secondary schools, helped fuel a Studio School movement. There will be nearly 50 schools open in the UK by late 2014, with several dozen in development, and there is great interest globally (www.studioschooltrust.org). The driving force in making them happen is David Nicoll, Chief Executive of the SST, along with his team, helped now by the many hundreds of people involved in the individual schools.

THE UNIVERSITY FOR INDUSTRY/LEARN DIRECT

In the early 1990s I came up with the idea for a University for Industry that would provide learning materials and opportunities at workplaces. The original idea was to use satellite TV, and online tools (this was just before the creation of the Internet). Employers would be encouraged to set aside space and time for their staff to learn – everything from lunchtime courses in foreign languages to very short tuition on use of a new technology. The idea was taken up by Gordon Brown, and included in the Labour Party manifestos in 1992 and 1997.

The University for Industry was launched at the end of the decade, and renamed as Learn Direct. At its peak Learn Direct had the second highest number of learners of any organisation in the world. The government elected in 2010 decided to sell the organisation (for around £50m) which is now controlled by a new University for Industry Trust.

THE U/CITIZENS UNIVERSITY

A recent idea was the U, or Citizens University. The starting point was to design a networked organisation that would provide people with the skills most useful to other citizens, in short, fun courses, provided in empty retail spaces (this was during the recession of 2010 when there was plenty of unused space in shopping malls and high streets). The Citizens University was announced by Prime Minister David Cameron in October 2010, and moved into a pilot phase in Sutton in London and

Hexham in Northumberland, focusing initially on first aid and conflict reduction skills. The idea has evolved to emphasise helping people to get to know others in their neighbourhood – turning strangers into neighbours. I think it has a great deal of potential and has an impressive head in Radhika Bynon.

THE RELATIONAL STATE

During the late 2000s I developed a set of ideas under the label of ‘the relational state’. This brought together a lot of previous work on shifting the mode of government from doing things *to* people and *for* people, to doing things *with* them. I thought there were lessons to learn from the greater emphasis on relationships in business, and from strong evidence on the importance of relationships in high quality education and healthcare. An early summary of the ideas was published by the Young Foundation in 2009. The ideas were further worked on with government agencies in Singapore and Australia, and presented to other governments including Hong Kong and China. An IPPR collection on the relational state, which included an updated version of my piece and some comments, was published in late 2012. Since then Nesta has backed many dozens of organisations which show the relational state in practice, in particular through the Centre for Social Action, a joint fund with the Cabinet Office.

UPRISING AND TRAINING ACTIVISTS

With colleague Rushanara Ali (now an MP), I helped set up the organisation Uprising in the late 2000s to train up a new generation of public leaders. The background was strong evidence of a disconnect between many communities, and particularly young people, and the structures of power which had become even more dominated by privileged, highly educated elite. The aim was to provide a structured course that would help young people take, and use, power for the public good. Uprising offered a year long course as part of which students had to shape a campaign for practical change. The programme began in East London, and then spread to Birmingham, Bedford and Manchester – helped by endorsement from the three main party leaders, and strong support from many mentors and organisations. There are now several hundred alumni, and Uprising is growing fast.

A parallel strand of work looked at youth leadership around the world – for example how digital technologies are being used, and the overlaps with entrepreneurship. My thinking on leadership is contained in a chapter in *The Art of Public Strategy*. Some of these ideas have also been used in leadership training around the world countries: for ANZSOG in Australia, the Canadian School of Government, Singapore Civil Service College, China Executive Leadership Academy and others.

HAPPINESS AND ACTION FOR HAPPINESS

I've had a longstanding interest in taking happiness seriously as a goal for government and politics, perhaps an effect of my encounters with Buddhism. This is a topic with a very long history – as I showed in 'Good and Bad Power', where I trace rulers' interest in happiness back to ancient china, India and Greece. My fascination with the relationship between happiness and public policy began when I made an Analysis programme for Radio 4 on the subject in 1995. There were brilliant interviews with psychologists (notably Michael Argyle), and economists (notably Andrew Oswald), but I couldn't get any interest from politicians or policy people. At Demos I started various pieces of work on the subject, which later materialised as the collection 'The Good Life'. In the Cabinet Office I commissioned a research study on the state of knowledge on happiness and public policy - though perhaps out of cowardice we used the phrase 'life satisfaction' to make it more palatable. There was still very little engagement from politicians.

But during the 2000s the momentum grew. I was quite closely involved in the OECD's Beyond GDP programme for developing new indicators (led by Enrico Giovannini), and spoke at their big events in Istanbul and Busan. The Young Foundation collaborated with Richard Layard to try out policies for wellbeing in local government, including teaching resilience in schools. David Cameron took part in a couple of sessions with this programme, and later committed to making happiness an important theme of his government. The main result of this was the Office of National Statistics survey on wellbeing, which is at least a good starting point. What's still missing is a serious approach to policy. I've written two recent pieces on this – one for the Oxford University Press Handbook on Happiness (published in 2013), and another for a forthcoming Nef/Sitra publication to be published in 2014. I argue that although there is strong evidence at a very macro level (for example, on the relationship between democracy and well-being), and at the micro level of individual interventions, what's missing is good evidence at the middle level where most policy takes place.

The other big initiative in this space was the launch of Action for Happiness in April 2011, to provide tools for happiness in communities and daily life. AfH was put together by Richard Layard, Anthony Seldon and me, and appointed Mark Williamson as its first, and very effective, Chief Executive. It's a fantastic organisation – with tens of thousands of members, the Dalai Lama as patron (since 2014), and great impact through workplaces, schools and communities, and a model of how carefully organised knowledge can make the world a better place.

CHANGING CULTURES AND BEHAVIOURS

Another interest has been in how public policy can influence cultures and behaviour. This was the topic of a Demos programme, which resulted in the publication 'Missionary Government' in 1996. In the Cabinet Office I co-authored an overview of how behaviour change could be influenced in various fields. At the time there was

limited interest in this from ministers. Interest greatly picked up at the end of the decade (I oversaw an evidence survey for the Department of Health in 2009, for example). In 2010 David Cameron appointed David Halpern, one of the authors of the earlier report, to run a Behavioural Insight Unit (BIT) within No 10. More recently this has been copied by the White House in the US and by the Singaporean government, and looks set to go from strength to strength. In February 2014 a new partnership was announced between the Cabinet Office, Nesta and BIT.

FUTURES

I've had a long involvement in futures methods of all kinds. These can be messy, and are usually wrong. But at their best they force people to think about how the world might change and how they might adapt. Since most organisations and bureaucracies like to assume that things won't change this is generally healthy. In the UK government, for example, I set up and chaired a network of futures teams from departments, and commissioned various pieces of work on the strengths and weaknesses of different methods (some of this is contained in the Art of Public Strategy). In 2010 I was part of an EU project looking at scenarios for the years 2030-50. Nesta hosted FutureFest in 2013 and commissioned various pieces of research on methods for futurology, from very quantitative ones to science fiction.

Futurology has plenty of vices – in particular a consistent failure to learn. That's why forecasts of the end of work, for example, continue to be repeated by famous futurologists even though past forecasts turned out to be wildly wrong. I'm attracted to the approach of people like Philip Tetlock who look rigorously at which forecasts turn out to be right. Of course some futurology is not trying to forecast, only to 'disturb the present'. But there still needs to be some reflection linking thoughts about the future to what actually happens.

CONNECTEDNESS AND CONNEXITY

My PhD was on telecommunications, and in particular how power would change in a world of networks. It was published as 'Communication and Control: networks and the new economies of communication'. Its central thesis was very simple: new communication technologies would strengthen both existing hierarchies and new networks. This happened to be a different argument to the conventional wisdoms. One was the argument that networks would automatically distribute power and decentralise. That argument has been fashionable since the 1960s, and continues to be repeated in an endless flood of books, articles and talks (eg around the magazine Wired). It's an argument I find appealing but know to be at best half true. Since the advent of the Internet the share of governments in GDP has risen, and the share of GDP of the top 1000 companies has grown substantially. Networks have undoubtedly empowered billions of people and made possible all sorts of new ways of living, working and organising. But they've also empowered the Pentagon, the Chinese leadership, Microsoft and Exxon.

The other issue I've tried to explore is the morality of a networked world. My book *Connexity* argued that interdependence would require radically different ways of thinking about responsibility – and awareness of our place in systems. It's a book I'm still proud of, though I regret its title – an attempt to reuse an old English word, which hasn't caught on.

PREDATORS AND CREATORS

Over the last few years I've been developing a way to understand capitalism and where it may be heading. This was published by Princeton University Press, with the title 'The Locust and the Bee: predators and creators in capitalism's future'. It argued that political programmes for the rest of this decade need to be sharp in reining in predatory tendencies in the economy, and equally sharp in better amplifying creativity. Quite a few political leaders have shown interest – but none has yet adopted the full programme it set out.

COLLECTIVE INTELLIGENCE

I've been slowly writing a book on collective intelligence over the last few years. The term has been used quite narrowly by computer scientists. My interest is in the collective forms of all aspects of intelligence: from observation and cognition to creativity, memory, judgement and wisdom. A short Nesta paper set out some of the early thinking, and a piece for *Philosophy and Technology Journal* (published in early 2014) sets out my ideas in more depth.

HEALTH KNOWLEDGE COMMONS

A big idea which could have great impact in a few years' time is the 'knowledge commons'. This is a very simple idea: that in every field there is an increasingly important job to be done in orchestrating knowledge of different kinds and making it useable. Parts of this work are done within academia, the professions and other fields of practice. But generally it's done very badly. The ease of Google searches makes us think that knowledge is much more accessible – and of course it is. But the very abundance of information continually reveals how poorly organised it is.

Health is a good example, since in most respects it has more data, evidence and orchestration than any other field. But even in health there is a huge gap between what the typical doctor, nurse or patient needs to know and what they can get from existing sources such as the Cochrane Collaboration, NICE or NHS Evidence. I set out some of the answers in a talk in 2011 to the Nuffield Foundation, and then commissioned an overview piece published by Nesta in 2013. The UK is well placed to bring this idea to life – linking the NHS, BBC, and our strengths in the semantic web. But for different reasons all the major players are distracted – at least for now.

BUDDHIST/BUDDHISH

I was lucky at the relatively early age of 17 to have a serious encounter with Theravada Buddhism – in the form of Nyanaponika Thera, one of its great thinkers and a pupil of Jung, who challenged me more profoundly than anyone I've ever met. I was never cut out to be a monk or a mystic, and couldn't seriously claim to be a practising Buddhist. But I learned more useful wisdom from that source than any other I have encountered. I believe that it is meaningful (although difficult) to talk of higher levels of consciousness (whether in people, organisations or whole societies), and that the only attractive views of progress involve progression in consciousness, and not just an accumulation of more stuff, technology or knowledge.