

Clio Padovani and Paul Whittaker

Fragile Communities and Craft Practices: A European Perspective

Over the last ten years, reduced competitiveness especially among European industry specialists, changing priorities in the international textile and fashion market, and world-wide financial uncertainties have caused a global restructuring of the textile and clothing sector. Manufacturers have revised employment patterns and worsening socio-economic conditions have prompted regions to rethink their plans for economic development.

In response to the pressures of a global transformation of the sector, some regions of the European Union with long-standing expertise in the textiles and clothing industry, have joined forces to capitalise on best policy initiatives and to creatively support small to medium sized enterprises or SMEs, in the textile and clothing sector. (Plustex Project 2012)

This paper presents, through reference to the Plustex project, two case studies of good practice in business enterprise that demonstrate the advantage of local knowledge economies that maintain, retain and exploit specialist and traditional community skills. The case studies suggest a number of factors that might contribute to securing the competitiveness of an enterprise while sustaining the community that supports that enterprise.

Plustex is an acronym for policy learning to unlock skills in the textile sector. It is co-financed by the Interregional Cooperation Programme INTERREG IVC through the European Regional Development Fund and has nine partners drawn from across northern and southern Europe. The partners include, among others, the Municipality of Prato, Lille Metropole, the Museo del Tessuto, Italy, and the University of Southampton. The project's methodology is anchored around six themes which were developed in consultation with companies that represent regions and communities with a long history of textile production; companies such as Faliero Sarti, based in Prato, Italy, who have a long history of specialist regional production of fabrics for haute couture and pret-a-porter. The six project themes are:

- The support of young entrepreneurship and innovative business models
- To foster textile and clothing incubation and business start-ups
- To increase levels of art, design and creativity in market production

- The clustering and internationalisation of small to medium sized enterprises
- The diversification of production towards high-quality and high-tech textiles and niche products
- Eco-innovation and social responsibility

The project's thematic framework offers the opportunity to investigate many examples of good practice throughout Europe. Research already completed suggests two examples of current practice that successfully demonstrate how the maintenance of local knowledge economies and the exploitation of specialist and traditional community skills can lead to not only innovative business models but also emboldened communities. The two examples of good practice in business enterprise are Teixidors and Harris Tweed.

Teixidors

Based near Barcelona, the Teixidors cooperative produces hand-woven products for fashion and interiors that include blankets and scarves made from wool, linen, cotton or silk. Informed and inspired by its surroundings, Teixidors has developed its own way of working and its own style, one that is intrinsically different to any other textile business currently operating in Spain. The Teixidors style is underpinned by the cooperative's mission which is to create hand-made design products using traditional and sustainable production methods while promoting social action and self-sufficiency. Teixidors create 'unique ... [woven] products made with high quality materials that always follow an entirely manual process' (Teixidors Project, 2012).

Founded in 1983, Teixidors is a cooperative of circa forty-five people with a social vocation, namely the social integration and economic independence of people with learning difficulties. According to Teixidors:

Sustainability is a global concept that has to incorporate environmental and social parameters. The integration of people at risk of social exclusion and the commitment to responsible consumption form part of the sustainability of Teixidors. (Teixidors Project, 2012)

The Teixidors social objective is carried out through the extraordinary creative work of its workers and the unique products they produce on manual looms. At Teixidors, the industrial process does not disavow difference; it is celebrated. Each weaver is encouraged to select materials with which they have sympathy, to build familiarity with their equipment, work to their strengths and according to their character and physique. In this way, gender, human physical strength and sensibility, not the industrialised mechanics of production, inflect the textile to create products with unique features: collections differentiated by the individuality of the maker. Distinctiveness is sought in the expert mixing of yarns to both realise the design and to explore new textures. The resultant products are sober, honest, timeless and always modern.

The quality of the Teixidors product can be demonstrated by a recent collection called O3AM® made in collaboration with Pensando en Blanco and Modern Alchemy, and developed in collaboration with Christian Zuzunaga. The O3AM® collection is based on details recovered from an artisan bakery in 1913 and inspired by anecdotes recalled by bakery workers who worked on a daily basis with the standard ingredients of bread and cake making: chocolate, wine, oil, eggs, yeast and bags of flour. The collection consists of sacks, poufs and plaids, designed to enable moments of repose and rest, and to be evocative of a recovered time. Hand-made by traditional upholsterers from high-quality linen and cotton woven on traditional handlooms, the sacks and poufs function as a neat piece of furniture and a tribute to past labor. The imperfect finishes of the Teixidors' hand-weavers' craft add authentic character to the industrial – utilitarian – inspired objects, while original graphics, applied in labelling, add to the individuality of the objects by suggesting a historical narrative.

Teixidors' collaboration with Christian Zuzunaga on the development of the home accessories collection – Integrate: Time and Space – represents a further stage in Zuzunaga's Alchemy series. For Zuzunaga, alchemy is a process of transformation. In the Alchemy series, each design starts from an analogue image taken from the urban environment. This image is then transformed through the digital lens and creatively explored in terms of colour, shape and scale before being applied to products through different materials, printing and manufacturing techniques. The Teixidors collaboration with Zuzunaga extends this palette of transformation by introducing the interpretation of the skilled crafts person and the character of hand weaving with its associated unrefined finishes. This can be seen in a blanket made in the series which combines highly saturated, intense bands of colour, with more greyed colours that appear affected by the 'white noise' of screen interference. Clearly influenced by screen transmissions, this blanket is suggestively haptic but also made unique by virtue of the imprecision of the repeated bands of colour.

Harris Tweed

Tweed is the nearest thing the British have to ethnic national dress. Espoused by Edwardian gentlefolk and the new middle classes, it became the uniform for peacetime pastimes and spoke of heather-coloured hills and fragrant glens. A fabric that looked and smelt like the land, its historical production was the work of artisans and skilled craft-workers in the sort of rustic industry that has all but disappeared from the British mainland. (Harper and McDougall 2012: 78–99)

Harris Tweed is the UK's oldest trademark and the only fabric in the world that is protected by its own Act of Parliament (1910). Harris Tweed is only made from pure virgin wool and hand-woven in the homes of the islanders of the Outer Hebrides, Scotland. To ensure the authenticity of the product, all production is inspected by the Harris Tweed Authority, the industry's governing body, and issued with the Harris Tweed Orb Mark.

The history of textile production in the Outer Hebrides is notable for both slow evolution and a considerable step change. For centuries, the islanders of Lewis, Harris, Uist, Benbecula and Barra wove cloth which they called the Clò Mór or 'the big cloth' simply so as to protect themselves from the harsh climate of the north of Scotland. The cloth each

weaver produced was almost exclusively for home use or for a very limited local market; surplus cloth was used only for barter or as a form of currency in trade amongst the islanders. By the end of the eighteenth century, however, textile production in the Outer Hebrides had changed significantly. The spinning of wool yarn from local raw materials had become a staple industry for the crofters. Finished hand-made cloth was exported to the Scottish mainland and traded as a product along with other commodities produced by the islanders, such as dry hides of goat and deerskins. In the nineteenth century, through the advocacy of Lady Catherine Herbert, who recognized the potential market for country sports jackets produced from the highly durable cloth, tweed not only became the fabric of choice for the landed gentry but also, through the careful nurturing of the communities, weaving skills quickly became a successful export industry. At its peak, the Harris Tweed industry produced annually over seven million metres of cloth.

Today there are around 140 self-employed Harris Tweed weavers and a network of three mills that apply finishing processes to the fabric. The combination of brand-specified materials, specialist weavers, and the application of market-sensitive finishes ensure high-quality products suitable for an increasingly competitive internationalised market place. Harris Tweed has however not always been successful. Prior to 2006, after decades of under-investment, poor sales, an ageing workforce and the loss of traditional skills, the future of Harris Tweed looked bleak. Annually, the volume of material produced had slumped to around 500,000 metres and many feared the industry was in terminal decline.

A renaissance of Harris Tweed began through a five-year initiative partly headed by a former Labour energy minister, Brian Wilson. Wilson and others reopened the Shawbost Mill and, in a spirit consistent with the passion of the American industrialist Ed Bain, who was also committed to securing a future for the beleaguered industry, set about producing not the drab tweeds that had become synonymous with the years of decline but instead, the multi-coloured tweeds desired by the tailors and customers of London's Savile Row.

Although Wilson and Bain took different approaches, through their efforts, tweed began to secure new audiences. Bain persuaded Alfa Romeo to introduce tweed as a high-quality supplement to a limited edition of luxury cars so as to add value to its brand; while Wilson entered into collaboration with Deryck

Walker, a soon-to-be Scottish Designer of the Year, to manufacture a range of outdoor wear inspired not by the heather of the Outer Hebrides but urban Glasgow.

Between them, Bain and Wilson laid the foundations for a brand repositioning of Harris Tweed. Rather than simply a stalwart of Scotland, Harris Tweed became a contemporary niche product, attractive to a diverse audience and adaptable to multiple uses. There are now more than a thousand Harris Tweed designs and, in 2012, production had dramatically increased to exceed a million metres – the biggest production run for fifteen years.

The success of the repositioning of the Harris Tweed brand as young, vital and adaptable can be exemplified in many ways. Blogs such as *Need for Tweed* encourage a virtual community to participate in the concept of tweed as a feature of contemporary fashion and style; the cloth is now commonplace attire for media personalities such as Doctor Who star Matt Smith and the rapper Tinie Tempah; and tweed is now included in such fashion must-have accessories as hand-stitched 'hi-top' trainers and handbags produced by cottage businesses in Scottish market towns, which are then sold in Italian and Japanese luxury boutiques alongside Louis Vuitton and Marc Jacobs. One such enterprise, Jaggy Nettle, works with freelance Harris Tweed weavers to design shoes and accessories to make an anti-traditional fashion statement.

Although Teixidors and Harris Tweed are obviously very different businesses and companies based in two very different countries, these two case studies suggest a number of factors that might contribute to securing the competitiveness of an enterprise while sustaining the community that supports that enterprise. These factors are sustainable social capital, collaboration and leadership.

Sustainable social capital

Alejandro Portes notes that the first systematic analysis of social capital was produced by Pierre Bourdieu, who claimed that social capital is composed of two elements: first, the social relationship that allows individuals to claim access to resources possessed by their associates, and second, the amount and quality of those resources (Lesser 2000: 45). Through social capital, Bourdieu states, actors can gain direct access to economic resources; they can increase their cultural capital through contact with experts, or affiliate with institutions that confer valued credentials.

A commitment to the value of the social relationship and the quality and range of its resources can be seen in the success of both Teixidors and Harris Tweed. For example, Teixidors is clearly a textile producer that offers a product informed by its social capital. The materials utilised to produce its products are sourced as much as possible from local farmers, and the skills and physical attributes of their workers are celebrated as important to the uniqueness of their goods. By sourcing materials from within the locality, Teixidors can not only support local affiliated industry but also garner the value of the assured provenance of their supplies. As a cooperative that values the individual contribution of its employees, the value of people is intrinsic to the success of its products.

Harris Tweed provides equal evidence of investment in the social capital of its community in that the time-honed artisan skills of its workers and the uniqueness of its location are core to its success. Indeed, Harris Tweed offers perhaps a more wide-ranging example of investment in the social capital than Teixidors. This is because investment in the Harris Tweed community of textile producers is sustained not only by the company but also by the politics of the region. By way of illustration, in 2011, the economic and community development agency for Scotland, the Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE), published a document that described how the HEI propose to take forward their priorities. The document outlines a vision for the Highlands and Islands to be a highly successful and competitive region in which increasing numbers of people choose to live, work, study and invest. It states that achieving the vision will require a range of approaches and interventions by the HIE, partner organisations and the businesses and communities across the region' (Highlands and Islands Enterprise Ambitions for Scotland: Operating plan 2011–14). The vision outlined is clearly not geared towards just supporting innovation and business enterprise but instead, recognises a link between strong communities and the delivery of sustainable economic growth. The vision commits, for instance, to

assist communities to maximise the benefits to be derived from renewable energy projects through direct ownership and creative partnerships with the private sector ... to support communities to invest in such things as asset acquisition, skills for young people, and ways of adding value to locally generated energy. (Highlands and Islands Enterprise Ambitions for Scotland: Operating plan 2011–14)

The HEI plan also included proposals for new business premises and supported the further development of the University of the Highlands and Islands. Central to the new university project is the Inverness Campus – a major infrastructure investment that will bring together education, research, business and the community in a new world-class location in the Highland capital.

In its work, the HIE is playing a leading role in developing the conditions that will enable the Highlands and Islands to fulfill its potential as a globally competitive region. Its work suggests that fragile communities, such as the textile workers that underpin Harris Tweed, along with their business community, gain mutual benefit when investment is made in the social capital of a community and when that social capital is sustainable.

Collaboration

Stephen S. Cohen and Gary Fields make a case for rethinking the concept of social capital (Cohen and Fields 1999: 108–30). They do not dismiss the power of the concept of social capital outlined and advocated by, for example, Robert Putnam but they do promote a variant, or put differently, an extension to its thinking. According to Cohen and Fields, the conventional basis of social capital is:

The complex of local institutions and relationships of trust among economic actors that evolve from unique, historically conditioned local cultures. Such institutions and social relationships, built on the experiences of a shared deep history, become embedded within a localised economy. They form what Putnam describes as networks of civic engagement that facilitate the activities of politics, production and exchange. In these locales of tight civic engagement, people know one another and one another's families. They meet frequently in non-work related organisations and activities. They constitute a dense and rich community and family structures. Those structures reinforce trust by sanctioning against, in powerful ways, the breaking of trust. In Putnam's model, cooperation built on trust propels development. It is rooted in complex and deep social ties and is an inherited historical characteristic. (pp. 178–9)

Although Silicon Valley undoubtedly constitutes a successful neighbourhood, for Cohen and Fields it is not a close-knit community; it does not therefore fit the conventional model of social capital. Silicon

Valley is a place notoriously populated by strangers not friends and it may be more correctly described as transient rather than historically rooted. This is not to say that the inhabitants of Silicon Valley do not share or that there is no network of relationships that build cooperation in a way similar to a conventional community. So how might the underlying architecture of this community be defined?

In Silicon Valley, social capital can be understood in terms of the collaborative partnerships that emerged in the region, owing to the pursuit by economic and institutional actors of objectives related specifically to innovation and competitiveness. It is the networks resulting from these collaborations that form the threads of social capital as it exists in Silicon Valley. (pp. 178–9)

Silicon Valley may not, in other words, exemplify a mutually supportive community with civic pride and a collective spirit but it can be described as a community of collaborating relationships. For Cohen and Fields, despite the lack of intimacy or familial bonds and despite the fact that its relationships are driven not by civic investments but by ‘trajectories of ... competitive choice, the dynamics of successive innovation, and the momentum of economic success’, it is the collaborative network of relationships that underpins the success of Silicon Valley and which constitutes its social capital (pp. 180–1).

Collaboration and functioning networks can be found as critical features of both Teixidors and Harris Tweed. Teixidors collaborate with local materials providers and innovate their products through collaboration with local design companies for an increasingly global audience. The company values its connection with the social community and its customers. It expresses this value by investing in the history and heritage of the region and by promoting the importance of the narrative of the network of making. The stepping-stones that disaggregate the narrative of the network of making include the marginalised maker, artisan skills, individualised products and sustainable resources. Similarly, Harris Tweed is a network of individually employed weavers, mills that apply finishes, and designers that innovate the product. Its success is based on the collaboration between the artisan and the manufacturer: the bond between the company and the community. As with Teixidors, the narrative of the making of Harris Tweed expresses both the value of the network of its participants but also adds incomparably to the value of the product:

heritage, sustainable materials, skills embedded in the community, and local products designed for an international audience underpin its narrative.

Leadership

Leadership can be conceived as the ability to transform a situation or a pattern of transactions with a group of followers. There are a number of theoretical models of leadership but two seem particularly appropriate to this essay. The transformational leadership theory draws on the concept of charisma and the force of an individual. Charismatic leaders are normally conceived of as people with vision, a strong sense of mission and the ability to create an emotional bond with their followers. By contrast, the theory of the transactional leader determines that the leader and their followers engage in mutually dependent exchanges that apportion a strong role to less dependent supporters. In other words, ‘leaders may be viewed primarily in terms of their ability to transform their situation or in terms of their transactions with their followers’ (Purdue 2001: 2213).

If leadership models might be conceived as transformational or transactional, what useful conclusions might we draw regarding leadership from the community based enterprises Teixidors and Harris Tweed? Put differently, what can Teixidors and Harris Tweed tell us about leadership in community-based enterprises?

Taken at face value, the success of Harris Tweed appears to demonstrate a transformational leadership model. In the story of the renovation of Harris Tweed, Bain and Wilson win the confidence of their community by developing a reputation for competence in acquisition and management of resources, and establish goodwill in their community of weavers, artisans and finishers through the proven benefits of their vision, commitment and energy. This might be contrasted with Teixidors, which could be judged to demonstrate a more transactional model of leadership. This is because the cooperative business model appears to demand a relationship between leaders and a community that is embodied in transactions. A leader conventionally earns credits through competence, conformity to group norms, length of participation or a prior reputation. In the theory of transactional leadership, however, leaders additionally earn goodwill and trust through an economy of exchange that, by extension, permits risk and innovation. The accumulation of credits allows the leader to innovate without losing any

followers: an outcome that would appear to be an advantage to any business but especially a community based cooperative.

Although we can attribute transformational and transactional styles of leadership to Teixidors and Harris Tweed, if we follow Derrick Purdue, transformational and transactional theories of leadership need not be mutually exclusive (Purdue 2001: 2215). In successful businesses like Teixidors and Harris Tweed in which more than one leader may operate, e.g. Bain and Wilson in Harris Tweed, or where more than one stakeholder collaborates to collective mutual benefit, as in Teixidors, it is possible to propose that transformational and transaction models of leadership are complementary. Indeed, they may be complementary by necessity. Success for Teixidors and Harris Tweed is more than likely achieved through the actions of different people contributing differently at the various stages of the business and communities' development. Leadership itself, whether embodied in charismatic persuasion or a trusted relationship, functions as a fulcrum through multiple leaders to achieve the different types of social capital critical to success; namely, an internal community and the capital benefits of a network of external collaborations or extended relationships.

That said, to secure the success of a community-based business, a confluence of different leaders and leadership styles alone may not be sufficient to transform leadership into business and community success. Leadership, as Nicolas Gutierrez, Ray Hilborn and Omar Defeo indicate, requires an unmistakable supplement. For Gutierrez et al. (2011), leadership in a co-management situation, in which two or more social actors negotiate, define and guarantee amongst themselves a fair share of the management functions, entitlements and responsibilities (Carlsson and Berkes 2004: 66), requires that at least one manager be entrepreneurial. That is, someone that demonstrates an ability to cope with risk and uncertainty, and a creative ability to solve problems through divergent means; an individual who is highly competitive, collaborative and efficient in the use of all available resources. Teixidors and Harris Tweed's ability to survive and prosper in an increasingly competitive global market is testament to their capacity to benefit from strong leadership and, without doubt, an entrepreneurial spirit.

To conclude, the case studies of Teixidors and Harris Tweed present a range of practices that operate to the mutual benefit of their businesses and their respective communities. The heart of these practices

includes investment in sustainable social capital, a strong commitment to building relationships through collaboration and entrepreneurial leadership. As we have seen, Teixidors and Harris Tweed provide models of social transformation and economic and social innovation in which heritage, artisan crafts and the community are key components to their success. As such, their business models are evidence of very good practice and the value of the European Union policy to promote and secure local knowledge economies while maintaining, retaining and exploiting specialist and traditional community skills.

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