

VALUING CULTURE

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A Background Note

There is a conundrum at the heart of Britain's cultural life: cultural activity, even when defined narrowly as participation in the visual and performing arts or attendance at concerts, museums, galleries, theatres and opera houses, has rarely enjoyed a more central place in national life than it does today, almost irrespective of the measure one chooses. Yet this flowering co-exists with deep anxiety in the arts that the significance of what it has to contribute is somehow misrepresented – or simply missing in policy discussions about culture.

Obvious indicators of the vitality of the arts include levels of capital investment; attendance figures for most though not all art forms and for museums; statistics on amateur participation; column inches given over to discussions of cultural policy and news about cultural issues and personalities; levels of public expenditure; levels of philanthropic support and sponsorship; numbers of registered charities with cultural purposes; and the extent of the potential contribution that policy makers assert that cultural institutions can make to wider economic and social goals – most recently, the ministerial suggestion that museums might usefully move directly into the secondary education market and run schools.

However, at the same time many leading members of the arts community express grave misgivings about the state of health of the sector, and the extent to which its needs and

dynamics are understood by policy makers. Distinguished conductors, theatre directors, museum directors and managers of leading venues have expressed concern, in considered but explicit language, that funding patterns are skewed towards the marginal cost of marginal programs and peripheral capital infrastructure whilst core activities remain under funded and core responsibilities inadequately or grudgingly recognized. In the process of expansion an already thinly capitalised and staffed sector is stretched still further.

There are several possible explanations:

- A bout of Spenglerian cultural pessimism;
- Resentment at the diminished place of the high arts and more traditional notions of culture in an increasingly plural and participative cultural agenda;
- The wailing of a community infantilised by the need to plead one's case over and over again that is intrinsic to a 'contract culture';
- An ingrained belief that the price of adequate arts funding is noisy, pre-emptive vigilance on the part of the funded;
- ... or, possibly, none of the above.

The purpose of this seminar is to provide a forum for a discussion of the proposition that there is another serious, systemic, cause of the conundrum and one that is – unusually – soluble, at least to a degree.

The argument runs that British public policy with respect to the arts has become lopsided. Specifically, the very strong emphasis in current policy on the actual and potential contribution of arts organisations to wider social and economic goals leaves under-articulated and, given an environment where there is a strong bias towards the quantifiable, undervalued the intrinsic worth of these organisations and their activities. Further, many of the broadly instrumental arguments in support of public expenditure are themselves neither soundly constructed nor empirically well-supported – cultural organisations are blunt and often unproven instruments of social and economic policy.

It is therefore, the proposition runs, in the interests of both effective, well-grounded public policy *and* of the long-term vitality of the arts that cultural policy is rooted in a more balanced and more secure understanding of arts organisations' roles and responsibilities – and their reasonable limits. This is not a naïve attempt to reground cultural policy, and the significant expenditure it entails, on some narrow, ineffable aesthetic premise. Although nor is it to deny that the 'poetics of wonderment' ought to have a place at the funding table somewhere.¹ Rather, it is an attempt to place economic and social arguments in a wider context and to ensure that those arguments are examined and demonstrated rather than simply asserted.

A further premise of the occasion is that a discussion of this issue is overdue. Although the assertions in the preceding paragraphs may appear sweeping and inflammatory, they are not particularly controversial within either the arts community or the public policy community. Both those who use them and those who are used by them view many current economic and social arguments in support of the arts with scepticism. The original, more nuanced, claims for the various impacts of the arts have been bowdlerised and inflated; they now simply represent a set of formulae to be either leveraged or circumnavigated by funder and funded, with no attention given to their content.

This is an unnecessarily corrosive state of affairs: it sets the bar of public accountability for the arts low and at a clumsy angle to the path trodden by their core activities, values and aspirations; it leaves arts funding vulnerable to transient intellectual fashion, as the weaknesses in particular instrumental arguments become more widely apparent; it irrationally favours particular forms of public investment in the arts and penalises others; and it systemically ignores the fact that the impacts of arts organisations on the economy, on social diversity, and indeed on educational attainment are largely epiphenomenal – incapable of full realisation unless their *cultural* purposes are effectively fulfilled.

These cultural purposes are themselves varied and that very variety means that a range of criteria is needed to inform public investment decisions. It is, for example, the goal of some arts organisations to support and develop a given canon of work, and to act as stewards of that tradition; it is the goal of others to provide opportunities for individual development through the transformational experiences that culture can provide; and of others to provide and build expressive and emotional bonds through communal participation. These are very different ambitions and need different perspectives for assessing the extent to which they are fulfilled by any given organisation.

A perspective that makes cultural institutions' cultural purposes subservient to, rather than central to, social, economic or educational purposes risks damaging the underlying asset through neglect. Unless cultural purposes, and their complementary relationship to wider institutional agendas, are better articulated by cultural institutions themselves and better understood by stakeholders in general and funders in particular, the uncomfortable chaffing of mutual misunderstanding and mistrust that exists between policy makers and the cultural sector will continue to grow.

Culture, in so far as it is an *explicit* focus of public policy, has taken on increasingly broad definitions throughout Western democracies in the post war period, moving incrementally beyond the ‘high’ art forms such as those supported in the early days of the Arts Council (though not of its predecessor CEMA), such as opera, symphonic music, ballet, modern dance, ‘serious’ theatre and the museums and galleries that were already beneficiaries of public funding. The stiff, arm’s-length embrace incrementally extended both ‘outward’ and ‘downward’: *outward* into new forms of cultural activity such as film making, photography, performance art and art forms that draw on non-western traditions; and *downward* from flagship or national organisations to regional, local and amateur organisations.

Although the language has changed with fashion, and the relative emphasis has shifted, the three fundamental drivers behind the thrust of cultural policy for the first thirty years or so of the post-war period were:

- To help to ensure certain art forms are sustained where the market alone would fail to sustain either a volume or quality that policy makers deem desirable;²
- To help to ensure that public access to art forms is not discouraged by admission or ticket prices that would be prohibitively expensive without public funding – an argument that is as old as public funding itself, as is vividly demonstrated by nineteenth century parliamentary debates on the case for free entrance to national museums;
- To help to break down ‘non-price’ barriers to enjoyment of cultural activity by inculcating and encouraging appreciation of or participation in particular art forms such as music, painting or drama.

More recently, dating broadly from the mid-1970's, this triumvirate has been joined by and subsequently eclipsed by a new set of arguments that sought to answer, in a way that could inform public policy, the question: 'But *why* would a government wish to ensure that certain art forms are sustained and that financial and psychological barriers to access are lowered?'

In developing answers to *why*, short shift has been given to the arguments that historically played such a strong role, both intuitively and explicitly, in the rationale for public funding of cultural activity, such as the contribution of cultural sensibilities to the development of the human spirit and of moral reasoning; and the value of cultivation of the human mind and of aesthetic pleasure – arguments on which most defenders of cultural value have relied, from Plato and Aristotle, the Stoics and the Epicureans through Montesquieu, Mathew Arnold to Herbert Read, via de Tocqueville and John Dewey.

The reasons are straightforward enough:

- The arguments are not amenable to quantification – a *sine qua non* of policy making – and are therefore unlikely to cut much ice in the allocative battles for finite resources;
- The arguments are freighted with value-judgements that while defensible are nevertheless controversial;
- The arguments do little to assist in informing decisions with respect to either the appropriate level of arts funding or the type of activities to be supported.

The current thrust of public policy is best exemplified in recent White Papers and related policy announcements by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and by the Arts Councils. These have three distinct facets:

- They emphasise the contribution of cultural organisations to policy goals for social inclusion; urban regeneration; tourism; inward investment; employment; the development of high added value creative industries such as media, video and entertainment; and education;
- They emphasise the importance of measuring policy success through statistical data such as jobs created, the multiplier effect stimulated by public investment, visitor numbers and their socio-demographic profile;
- Art-forms that are prohibitively expensive without either direct government support (traditionally the UK model) or fiscal privileges (traditionally the US model) such as theatre, lyric theatre, opera, dance, orchestral music, museums and non-commercial galleries (a.k.a. high culture) are often classed alongside, and addressed in conjunction with, both for-profit industries with a creative element such as film, advertising, graphic and industrial design, fashion, craft and pop music (a.k.a. popular culture), and informal and participative cultural activities such as non-professional music making and amateur photography.

Core purposes are recognized, but in the headline rather than the details of the departmental targets and drive resource allocation. From the DCMS 2003 Annual Plan: “We should not lose sight of the fact that participation in sporting and cultural activities are an end in themselves and enrich people’s lives every single day...”; or, from the DCMS Strategic Plan for 2003 – 2006: “Although not listed as key projects for the purposes of this document, we and our NDPBs undertake a range of core functions that underpin the

Department's Strategic Priorities and Aims." There is such a hiatus between these asides and the overwhelming policy preoccupations on the plans themselves but, importantly, it is a matter of degree.

From an historical perspective, the emphasis on the role of the arts in "improving [educational] attainment and behaviour, and encouraging lifelong learning; helping to combat crime and create safe, active and cohesive communities, [and] ...making a very substantial contribution to the economy"³ is novel, even perverse. It eschews value-judgments that imply a hierarchy of cultural value; emphasizes the quantitative in a field where qualitative assessments have been regarded as central; and aspires to judge cultural organisations by their efficacy in addressing social and economic agenda that could in some cases be addressed more effectively directly.

Indeed, the social historian Joli Jensen has recently sought to identify the source of the deep-rooted but – she argues - unfounded belief in the transformational power of investment in culture on social ills in the very desire *not* to have to address social problems more directly – investment in culture as a form of displacement activity. "Many of us yearn to find an easy way to make our cities better, our lives safer, our children smarter But this is a dangerous illusion...we must stop imagining that we can inject children, classrooms, or communities with good culture and make them better." ⁴

Four sets of partially overlapping arguments have been particularly influential:

- Economic – investment in certain arts has a high 'multiplier effect', generating direct and indirect expenditure, through the first round of construction or other investment related activity and subsequently by attracting inward investment and

tourism, and thereby creating jobs;

- Social – investment in the arts can ease social divisions by creating a context in which otherwise socially disempowered groups can participate in society on a more equal basis; and it creates ‘social capital’ – to use the concept developed by Pierre Bordieu but catapulted into popular currency by the political sociologist Robert Putnam – which increases social cohesion and therefore ameliorates the anomic, morally corrosive and socially divisive impact of the unfettered marketplace.⁵
- Psychological and personal – participation in the arts can accelerate intellectual and motor skills. The Mozart effect – your capacity for solving quadratic equations will be improved if your mother listened to Mozart intensively during the later stages of pregnancy – is probably the best-known variant.
- Civic – the civic argument, an amalgam of the above, is that a city with a vibrant cultural infrastructure, in which a range of different forms of public and private sector investment in the arts are undertaken, can create a virtuous circle of high economic performance, high inward investment, high educational attainment and high levels of civic engagement.⁶ The most powerful current incarnation of the argument is that promoted by the ubiquitous urbanist Richard Florida in his recent book *The Rise of the Creative Class*.⁷

The arguments have further extended the definition of cultural activity that is used in the context of policy making, in particular breaking down the traditional divide between non-profit cultural organisations and private sector industries employing creative talent such as pop music, the entertainment sector, and film-making, commercial broadcasting,

graphic, product and textile design, fashion, computing and advertising, in pursuit of commercial objectives. Chris Smith, when Minister of Culture, launched a 'mapping exercise' that concluded that the creative industries (subsuming the arts sector) accounted for some 5% of GDP and underlined this broad definition of culture by the publication of his book of essays *Creative Britain* that co-located both commercial creativity and culture as central to the objects of cultural policy, with what was widely interpreted at the time as a stronger policy interest in the former.

It is not the purpose of this note to offer an extensive critique of the basis for current cultural policy. It is, however, the intention to signal the growing academic literature that draws attention to the lack of empirical evidence for many of the more bald assertions in policy discussions about the socially and economically benign impact of investment in the arts.

Perhaps the biggest disconnect between policy and broad academic consensus is in the area of *economic impact studies*. Economic impact studies generally seek to provide a rationale for investment in the arts, usually capital investment, on the grounds that the capital expenditure and subsequent operating expenditures will generate further expenditures that are higher than those for comparable forms of investment. They are, in Bruce Seaman's phrase "A fashionable excess ...diverting attention from the kinds of research most appropriate for building a legitimate case for further public support of the arts."⁸

The now widespread critique of impact studies has several thrusts: they fail adequately to account for the opportunity cost of investment; their definitions of cultural activity are overly-generous in practice even where the surrounding rubric suggests they are taking a narrow definition; and estimates used for funding proposals are almost never compared against actual outcomes so that some empirical basis can be built up to test assertions.

With a few fastidious, methodologically exact, and therefore generally very expensive exceptions, impact studies have not contributed significantly to understanding the dynamics of arts-based economies and have come to be seen as hack-work. And yet they continue to be integral to the required case making for a range of public funding in the arts, an empty part of the leveraging and circumnavigating game.

Arguments concerning the contribution of the arts to *social* goals do not present quite such a monolithic paradigm as economic impact studies. But nor do they appear to be strongly grounded in empirical data. Indeed some more extreme assertions of the social impact of arts activities have the aspect of a cargo cult, and have more the character of incantation than argument. Sara Selwood's conclusions to the overview of hard data on the effect of investment in 'The UK Cultural Sector' were that "the data on the cultural sector are often incomplete, inaccurate or unavailable. This means that policy decisions and government initiatives are rarely based on an accurate picture of the sector, and little is known about their impact."⁹ Several further recent studies also argue persuasively that the basis for social impact policy is as variable as that for economic impact.¹⁰

The *psychological* and related developmental arguments have recently been sifted in two extensive literature reviews that cover over three hundred studies worldwide that seek to explore, demonstrate or again simply assert the benign impact of arts participation on various forms of physical, emotional or intellectual development.¹¹ The conclusions of the reviews by no means write off the findings. They conclude, based on the evidence culled, that there is evidence of a 'Mozart effect' – but it is limited to a specific type of spatial task that requires mental rotation in the absence of a physical model and that needs constant topping up by more Mozart – could be worse... Similarly there is a small but statistically significant association between the voluntary study of music and achievements in mathematics. Where the hiatus in causal reasoning occurs is in moving from these

interesting, discrete findings to public policy, which appears to select a specific correlation, exaggerate its significance and then generalise its applicability.

The broadly *civic* arguments are perhaps the most contentious and most relevant to patterns of decision making in culture. The use of culture as a tool for urban regeneration and revitalisation has become one of the central planks of urban policy throughout the world. Strategies range from iconic architecture to festivals to combinations of marketing-and-temporarily-enhanced-programming, as in Cities of Culture. Policy objectives range from enhancing civic pride and strengthening local communities through to creating a profile that is effective in attracting high added value inward investment and international tourism. The level of public investment worldwide in these strategies in the past decade has been truly extraordinary. It is what lies behind much of the perception of the current period as a golden age for the arts. The evaluative literature reaches mixed conclusions and, rightly, suggests that the jury needs to be out for long enough to establish whether the new infrastructure, and its impacts, is sustainable.

The critical issue here appears to be the ‘zero-sum’ aspect of cities competing internationally for increasingly mobile, and fickle international capital and tourists through the same basic devices, all of which require a higher level of resources to operate effectively than anyone planning such projects finds it politic to articulate. For those projects with more local agendas, and projects scaled to local resources, the evidence appears significantly more positive.¹²

The overwhelming point in all this literature is that the deeper one digs, with honourable exceptions, the less solid the foundations transpire to be, in terms of a tightly reasoned causal model generating testable and tested hypotheses that can responsibly be used as the basis for the act of generalisation known as ‘robust policy’.

The broad thrust of the argument above is relatively simple. The grounds for supporting cultural activity in the United Kingdom have shifted fundamentally over the past quarter of a century as the historic basis for public funding failed to resonate with an increasingly output-oriented, contractualised, quantitative approach to public sector management. New, more narrowly instrumental arguments both resonated better with this agenda *and* gave the arts access to adjacent, often more generous, public sector budgets, such as those earmarked for social and urban policy. However, these rationales are shaky, generate some odd investment decisions and, as their analytical and empirical weaknesses beginning to show, are likely to give rise to critical reviews of both the level and pattern of arts funding.

It is therefore important that policy makers and analysts as well as the arts community refine and reground the instrumental arguments and find a common, mutually intelligible language in which more central cultural purposes can be placed alongside invigorated, more carefully reasoned instrumental purposes.

In the 1980's and 1990's, there was concern expressed about cultural institutions in general, and larger ones in particular. On the one hand, their narrow socio-economic base, their commitment to the idea of absolute standards of quality, the inherently regressive nature of public funding of cultural institutions (given the socio-economic profile of their audiences), the centrality of historic texts and objects to their *raison d'être*, and their formal lack of accountability all rendered them vulnerable to a broadly left-wing

attack. But by dint of their inherent unprofitability and their difficulty in reducing their multiple purposes to quantifiable performance indicators, they were also vulnerable to attack from the right and exponents of business efficiency.

Their response to the challenge ranged from silence (sometimes stunned, sometimes surly) to a concerted attempt to reposition themselves politically and morally through an expanded social agenda and a concertedly more 'business-like' approach to management and the development of new income streams. The result has been a transformation of many institutions, mostly for the better.

It would now appear to be a good time to reawaken and rearticulate interest in the fundamental contribution that cultural institutions can make to our quality of life at the deepest level. The current language of performance and its quantification is unlikely to be jettisoned by this or any future administration. But it needs to accommodate the vocabulary of cultural value. Unless a common and public language can be found in which to discuss cultural purposes, and intrinsic – *alongside* instrumental – value, then funders will tend to focus on a partial view of cultural institutions and the funded will chaff and sulk, dependent though they are on the public purse. So policy makers and the cultural community have an opportunity to face a common set of challenges on common ground.

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Notes and references

¹ For a recent, powerful contemporary articulation of the inherent value of aesthetic pleasure, see Peter de Bolla's *Art Matters* (2001).

² The basis on which the 'deeming' is done has become more sophisticated or more convoluted depending on one's perspective. Some implicit notion of what constitutes a civilised society has given way more recently to methodologies such as contingent valuation theory which seek to ground rationales for sustaining even relatively inaccessibly art forms in imperfectly expressed consumer preferences, mainly one suspects as a way of avoiding absolute assertions of cultural value that invite equally absolute refutations. See, for example, *Contingent Valuation Studies in the Arts and Culture: An Annotated Bibliography* at <http://harrisschool.uchicago.edu/wp/03-04.html>

³ DCMS 2003 Annual Report, p3.

⁴ Joli Jensen *Is Art Good for Us?* (2002).

⁵ The central premise, as articulated in Robert Putnam's seminal work *Bowling Alone* (2000) is that social networks have value. Social capital refers to the collective value of all social networks and the inclinations that arise from these networks to do benign things for each other ["norms of reciprocity"]. The philosopher Martha Nussbaum has developed another strand of this argument, advocating that "We [should] insist that [the arts] make a vital and irreplaceable contribution to citizenship, without which we will very likely have an obtuse and emotionally dead citizenry, prey to the aggressive wishes that so often accompany an inner world dead to the images of others. Cutting the arts is a recipe for the production of pathological narcissism..." *Martha C. Nussbaum* *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of the Emotions* (2001)

⁶ Although European policy analysts were generally quicker to develop these arguments than Americans, they are now extremely widespread throughout advanced democracies, spreading with meme-like speed through academic journals, conferences and websites. The civic argument has recently been presented – as applied to California's Silicon Valley – in an economic model that doubles as an educational computer game available for \$40 from Cultural Initiatives Silicon Valley at www.arts4sv.org.

⁷ Richard Florida *Rise of the Creative Class And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life* (2002)

⁸ See Bruce Seman "Arts Impact Studies: A Fashionable Excess." In *Economic Impact of Arts: A Sourcebook*, edited by William T. Pound (1990).

⁹ Sara Selwood *The UK Cultural Sector. Profile and Policy Issues*, PSI (2002).

¹⁰ See for example *Arts as a Means of Alleviating Social Exclusion. Does it Really Work?* Eleonora Belfiore and *Evaluating the Social Impact of Participation in Arts Activities* Paoli Merli, both in [The International Journal of Cultural Policy](#), May 2002.

¹¹ Ellen Winner and Lois Hetland *The Arts and Academic Achievement, What the Evidence Shows* The Journal of Aesthetic Education, (Fall 2000); and Richard J Deasy ed. *Critical Links: Learning in the Arts and Student Academic and Social Development* (2002).

¹² For an judicious up-to-date overview of the evidence of economic and social impacts, primarily in the UK context, warts and all, see Michelle Reeves, *Measuring the Economic and Social Impact of the Arts: A Review* (2001) at <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/downloads/information/measuring.pdf>