

CULTURAL POLICY IN A POST-POLITICAL AGE

François Matarasso

Article 27. (1) Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.

Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)¹

1 THE HISTORIC ROOTS OF CULTURAL POLICY IN EUROPE: THE 1830s TO THE 1930s

1.1 Public culture in the industrial city

The values and practices of contemporary European culture are still defined by ideas that emerged during the Enlightenment, and the period of industrialisation and imperialism with which it is associated. There are older influences, of course: opera emerged in Renaissance Italy, which itself took inspiration from the Classical past.² But it is the Enlightenment's invention of the Fine Arts that implicitly (and carelessly) relegated most human culture to a subordinate position as the 'not-fine arts', defined by adjectives such as amateur, traditional, folk or popular arts, as well as new concepts like craft and entertainment.³ The philosophical innovations of the Enlightenment gave European art extraordinary new energy and a new social and economic importance in booming industrial cities. It is here that the first efforts at cultural inclusion can be found, and they frame the alternative top-down and bottom-up strategies that still define cultural policy today, in and beyond Europe.

CULTURAL POLICY IN A POST-POLITICAL AGE v.2 (08/22) was originally written in 2021 as part of 'Opera Co-creation and performance' for the Traction Project, which has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 870610. It was published on the Traction website in May 2021. This version was published on 5 August 2022 at <https://parliamentofdreams.com> and <https://miaaw.net> © 2022 François Matarasso, under the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/) licence. You are free to copy, distribute, or display the digital version on condition that: you attribute the work to the author; the work is not used for commercial purposes; and you do not alter, transform, or add to it.

From the top down: philanthropy and the civilising mission

The social elites who controlled and benefited from 19th century Europe's industrial expansion feared that the large urban populations their factories needed would be drawn towards the Enlightenment's more revolutionary ideas. So, among other attempts to reduce social discontent, they applied some of their excess wealth to establishing art galleries, museums, libraries, and concert halls with the express purpose of 'civilising' the people. These new cultural institutions were intended primarily to serve the growing bourgeoisie, and codes of dress and behaviour helped keep working people at a distance. At the same time they provided a visible model of cultural taste that could be used to defend the existing social order and be a symbol of social advancement to which others could aspire. Public and commercial culture thus helped drive the rapid expansion of a middle class with an interest in social stability and new forms of civic life. Art became an increasingly important mark of distinction, to use Bourdieu's term.⁴ In Britain, industrialists such as Andrew Carnegie, Joseph Rowntree, Henry Tate and William Lever raised cultural institutions that still dominate the landscape, literally and metaphorically. These men of Empire saw this as part of the so called 'civilising mission'⁵, not as democratising culture: indeed many of them thought democracy a revolutionary idea. But in the second half of the 20th century, the legacy of their ideals was recast in more democratic terms by the new welfare states.

From the bottom up: culture, education and social change

During the 19th and early 20th centuries, the cultural paternalism of the rich was balanced and often contested by the autonomous cultural action of working people, especially the skilled workforce who established their own libraries, institutes and associations. The Salford Lyceum is a typical example. Established in 1838, in just two years it had recruited more than 2000 members, including some women, each of whom paid an annual fee to access its library, classes, lectures and other cultural activities.⁶ Similar groups sprang up across the continent, often linked with the emerging labour movement; they had an emancipatory, sometimes political vision. They sought access not only to what Matthew Arnold called 'the best that has been thought and known in the world'⁷ but to the whole spectrum of culture, including that being created by a new urban working class. They claimed an equal right to high culture, including the right to question, enlarge and reject that culture, and to defend their own forms of cultural expression. Although the term was not invented until the 20th century, many of these people would have agreed that they were working towards cultural democracy. They were, after all, fighting for democracy in every other aspect of their lives.

1.2 Conservative and progressive visions of culture

Each of these approaches reflected the different positions on the social ladder occupied by their advocates, but there was agreement on one thing: culture was important, in itself and as a path to self-improvement. That agreement helps explain the blurred lines between top-down and bottom-up approaches to cultural access. Discussing the ‘civilising mission’ in the context of 19th century European colonialism, Harry Liebersohn notes that:

Sometimes it involved a large degree of external imposition, but at other times, non-Europeans appropriated Western culture for their own ends.⁸

This appropriation was equally possible *within* European societies, where working people used elite culture for their own purposes.⁹ The key difference between these two visions of culture was whether the personal development achieved through engaging with art could, or should, translate into social change and, if so, what kind of social change. Even with its best intentions, the top-down cultural mission has an essentially conservative purpose, as much discourse about social impact is today. Its claim to universalism obscures that it promotes elite culture, values and interpretations in order to preserve them and the social order they represent. Didier Maleuvre argues that:

Culture is the sum of activities by means of which a society copies and transmits itself, recommends itself to its members, and cements its identity. Culture is therefore conservative by nature. To the effect that, as a branch of culture, art is part of society’s conservative system of self-reproduction. [...] And it behooves us to keep this in mind—at whatever point of history we look, we find the art which its society wanted and maintained for its own advantage.¹⁰

This statement, with its implicit ideal of one society with a single identity, begs the question who is ‘its society’? Is it the city fathers building galleries and museums in the image of Roman temples and to their own glory, or the far greater number of people who might recognise themselves and their values in such institutions only in part or not at all?

We need to look back to the 19th century and the beginning of the modern city because that is when these different visions of access to culture begin to establish themselves. They turned, as they still do, on whether culture is imagined as a fixed and universal value or a territory of interpretation and contestation. Or, to frame the question in terms of the Traction project: is opera an art of self-reproduction, in which only a few are licenced to innovate, or is it a common heritage that all can interpret and reinvent? On one side, the civilising mission of cultural democratisation encourages those who do not attend to discover and be transformed by the experience of opera. On the other, the

ideals of cultural democracy assert a universal right to make opera in whatever ways and for whatever purpose those involved decide. It is, in short, an argument about power and control—and it is the unavoidable tension within co-creation.

2 CULTURAL POLICY AND THE WELFARE STATE: THE 1940s TO THE 1980s

2.1 The civilising mission becomes cultural democratisation

The foundations of modern cultural policy in Europe were laid during and after the Second World War.¹¹ They were shaped by the intellectual and physical legacy of the civilising mission, recast as ‘cultural democratisation’, better to reflect the ideals of the welfare states that were one of the most profound outcomes of the conflict. Among the social responsibilities these welfare states took on when they nationalised large parts of industry were the previous owners’ practice of cultural patronage. In the 1950s, on both sides of the Iron Curtain, access to culture was massively extended through state broadcasters and funding of cultural institutions. For the historian, Tony Judt:

The broad Western European consensus of the age held that only the state had the resources to service the cultural needs of its citizens: left to themselves, individuals and communities would lack both means and initiative. It was the responsibility of a well-run public authority to deliver cultural nourishment no less than food, lodging and employment.¹²

Access to art was written into the social contract, literally so in Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), and in the Preamble to the 1946 French Constitution. This was a transformational idea, and one that would later be used to challenge the cultural democratisation that inspired it. But in the 1950s, if the basis of cultural access was changing, the belief in a single, universal culture expressing the best human values remained. Despite their modernist appearance, new post-war theatres and concert halls served the art that had long been valued by social elites.

Believing in culture

Laurent Fleury describes this idea of cultural democratisation as:

A project to convert the public to privileged symbolic forms, which presupposes a strategy of proselytization of the masses in the service of scholarly or

literary works and with the objective of making as many people as possible visit and venerate the works judged to be legitimate.¹³

Fleury, a sociologist, uses religious language (*'culte', 'consacrées'* in the original French) to define this ideology, highlighting the faith implicit in both the civilising mission and cultural democratisation. Both philosophies seek to convert people to a full appreciation of culture, in the belief that they will find the experience as valuable as does the advocate. It should be recognised that those who established this as the foundation of post-war cultural policy, like their philanthropic predecessors and their public service successors, were motivated by good intentions, according to their own lights. Feeling enriched by their own access to a body of cultural experiences, ideas and works, they wished to share those treasures widely. It is common, perhaps even natural, for people to seek to persuade others to share their enthusiasms, tastes and ideas, though they may be unaware of the ideologies behind them.

But the meaning of that desire changes when it becomes policy, backed with the authority and resources of the state. It becomes a mechanism for supporting the art which a society—or, more accurately, the leadership of a society—*'want[s] and maintain[s] for its own advantage'*. Then both the culture and the institutions democratising it risk being seen as, or becoming, oppressive. In a wartime lecture entitled *'Art and Democracy'*, the curator Kenneth Clark recognised that:

It goes without saying that [people] must not have art stuffed down their throats. This was a common practice in the last century, arising partly out of the middle classes' genuine desire for self-improvement [...] and apt to lead, in England above all, to repugnance and rebellion; but perhaps it was less disastrous than the modern practice of asking people what they like.¹⁴

Clark preferred instead *'to tempt people with scraps'*, while cautioning that *'they must not be spoon fed or they will never learn to feed themselves and soon will be too lazy even to open their mouths.'*¹⁵ Such patrician condescension seems shocking today, but how far are the methods advocated by Clark from today's art education and outreach programmes?

The fairness and effectiveness of cultural democratisation

Cultural democratisation, understood principally as extending access to art and culture, remains the principal justification for spending public money to subsidise and promote the arts in European states. It is broadly accepted by the public, though the fairness of the distribution is sometimes a matter of political debate. One frequent criticism concerns geographical distribution, as the concentration of facilities and creative people in regional and especially

capital cities absorbs most of the funding. The solution of creating institutional outposts (such as Tate Liverpool, and Louvre Lens) has produced uneven results. Another, particularly suited to the performing arts, is touring, which is the lifeblood of a company like Irish National Opera, which, as its name implies, is tasked with serving the whole country.

Another criticism of the policy of cultural democratisation is that in supporting a small and sometimes contested part of artistic creation, it uses universal taxation to subsidise the pleasures of a mostly wealthy minority. Opera, as the most expensive subsidised art form and one predominantly enjoyed by elites, has long been the epicentre of this argument.¹⁶ The opera house—in many European countries distinguished by royal patronage—is the very symbol of unfairness in a public culture system still shaped by wealth and class. Political debate about the welfare state normally focuses on social protection of the poor but it is the middle class who benefit most from health, education and cultural services.¹⁷ Opera is one of the places where that reality is disconcertingly visible.

But the most serious critique of cultural democratisation may be that it is ineffective. Evidence of its success, after more than 70 years, is limited and ambiguous. The contrast with education makes this very clear. The gradual extension of education to all has transformed European countries, to the great benefit of poor families and of society in general. It is hard to see similar social change after 70 years of cultural democratisation. The UK Government's regular *Taking Part Survey* reports that the 'proportion of respondents who had engaged with the arts in the last 12 months' was 76% in 2019/20, exactly where it was in 2005/06.¹⁸ In *Culture is Bad for You*, Orian Brook, Dave O'Brien and Mark Taylor give a detailed analysis of the relationship between culture and inequality in England, looking at both consumption and production. They conclude that there is:

[A] distance between much of what our cultural occupations produce (and what the state funds) from the majority of the population. [That suggests] a disconnection between cultural production, cultural consumption, and whole swathes of the population. This is especially true when we think about the intersection of class, race, and gender.¹⁹

Nor can they identify evidence of social mobility in the creative workforce. Their research shows, if anything, a narrowing of social profile in cohorts born between 1953 and 1992, under policies of cultural democratisation.²⁰ Patterns of cultural production and consumption have changed greatly since the 1950s, but there is little evidence that has happened because of cultural democratisation. Indeed some who defend the policy are often critical of today's

cultural values, which they see as a betrayal of the Enlightenment's legacy. In fact, that cultural change is associated with much larger social, political and economic factors, including rising education, prosperity and leisure, the information and technological revolution, and the spread of democracy. As the late Clive James wrote in his defence of liberal culture:

There was never a time like now to be a lover of the arts. Mozart never heard most of Bach. We can hear everything by both of them. Brahms was so bowled over by Carmen that he saw twenty performances, but he had to buy twenty opera tickets to do so. Manet never saw all his paintings in one place: we can. While Darcey Bussell dances at Covent Garden, the next Darcey Bussell can watch her from Alice Springs. Technology not only has given us a permanent present, but has given it the furniture of eternity.²¹

This is indeed a brimming cornucopia but, if Brook and her colleagues are right, it may not be down to policies of cultural democratisation. More problematically, it is possible that the very abundance of cultural riches and their ease of (online) access is making them less and less valuable. This is, after all, an age when Paul McCartney gives away a new record to readers of a Sunday newspaper.²² Little wonder, then, if Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker end their historical survey of opera on a melancholy note, suggesting that

Ever-easier access to opera may do little to ameliorate an overall attrition in the numbers of those who care whether opera exists at all.²³

2.2 Community art, participation and cultural democracy

The challenge to the post-war policy of cultural democratisation did not take long to arrive. It was produced by the policy itself and by the larger changes brought about by the welfare state of which it was part. The children of the baby boom came of age in the 1960s, having benefited from peace, democracy, education, health care and growing prosperity (although, in the nature of such things, they did not always know or appreciate what they had gained compared to earlier generations). Many entered new universities and art schools, the first in their family to access higher education. They were primed to question the paternalism from which they had benefited. The result was the cultural revolution of the 1960s that, with the neoliberal reaction against it of the 1980s, has defined our subsequent lives.

The emergence of cultural democracy

The reaction against cultural democratisation was broad and varied, taking in popular music, advertising, cinema, university teaching, radical politics, race

relations, feminism, sexual liberation and much more. Its diversity was both its strength and its weakness. It was everywhere, but struggled to establish coherent—or sometimes comprehensible—alternative values or programmes. In publicly-funded culture, the reaction was led by community arts or *actions culturelles*—projects nourished from such diverse sources as avant-garde art, popular education, community development, youth work and Marxism. An early theoretical critique of cultural democratisation was set out in the ‘Déclaration de Villeurbanne’, published in May 1968 by a group of artists, students and trade unionists who asserted that:

It is our very attitude toward culture that is challenged in the most radical fashion. However pure our intentions, this attitude appears to a considerable number of our fellow citizens to be effectively a choice made by the privileged in favour of a hereditary, exclusive, in simple terms, bourgeois culture.²⁴

Claiming to have been ‘more or less victims’ of this bourgeois culture, the authors argued for a completely new approach to cultural policy and support:

Because it is now entirely clear that no definition of culture will be valid nor will have any meaning unless it is clearly useful to the people concerned.²⁵

Unfortunately, the declaration’s action points failed to match its stirring ideals, being primarily concerned with the quantity and distribution of public subsidy for culture. When artists apply themselves to policy, the argument often does come down to how the cake is divided.

But in 1976 that these ideas found a more coherent policy concept: cultural democracy. That year, the Council of Europe convened a conference of European Ministers of Culture and Education ‘to compare problems of cultural policy in relation to their shared acceptance of democratic values’. This event can be seen as a landmark in post-war European cultural policy. The conference concluded by adopting an important series of resolutions, in the first of which the politicians adopted the following principles for cultural policy:

- I. Policy for society as a whole should have a cultural dimension stressing the development of human values, equality, democracy and the improvement of the human condition, in particular by guaranteeing freedom of expression and creating real possibilities for making use of this freedom.
- II. Cultural policy should be regarded as an indispensable part of governmental responsibility and should be worked out in conjunction with policies for education, leisure and recreation and sport, the environment, social affairs, town planning, etc.

- III. Cultural policy can no longer limit itself exclusively to taking measures for the development, promotion and popularisation of the arts; an additional dimension is now needed which by recognising the plurality of our societies, reinforces respect for individual dignity, spiritual values and the rights of minority groups and their cultural expressions. In such a cultural democracy, special efforts must be made on behalf of disadvantaged and hitherto underprivileged groups in society.
- IV. There should be an innovatory aspect in cultural policy and encouragement for the development of a wide range of new sociocultural activities so that all may take an active part in the cultural life of their community with a view, inter alia, to helping bridge differences between generations.
- V. It is necessary to promote the development of “outreaching” cultural activities, e.g. for people in sparsely populated or rural areas, at work-places, etc. and ensure the provision of adequate facilities for these activities, e.g. by encouraging the use of new distribution channels, promoting new techniques and in ensuring a wide range of local premises, both specially provided and through the use of libraries, schools, halls, etc.
- VI. Cultural policy has a most important educational element, and must encourage, in particular, new ways of allowing children to exercise their creative talents and thus to ensure a full development of their cultural potential, and a new aesthetic sensibility to the environment.
- VII. It is important to encourage a more critical understanding of the products of the mass media, and to ensure that there, is a wide range of choice, with opportunities for access to communication in the various media.
- VIII. Cultural policy also has a special responsibility to counteract the negative effects of commercialised production of mass culture, e.g. by offering alternatives based on quality, by ensuring a wide range of products and by using more fully the native resources of each cultural community.²⁶

It is worth citing the conference resolution at length because it sets a conceptual and policy framework that validates the grassroots work of cultural actors, from the working people who established the Salford Lyceum in 1830s to the community artists working for social change in the 1970s—and to anyone with a democratic vision of culture today. The Oslo Resolutions proposed cultural democracy as a coherent alternative to cultural democratisation, and did so through a political statement adopted by ministers representing 22 European states, with observers from the European Commission, UNESCO and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. This was a long way from the occupation of a provincial theatre in Villeurbanne and the

Resolutions remain important because, despite the dated language and assumptions, they propose ideas and claims that remain unfulfilled.

In 1976, many community artists recognised the Oslo Resolutions as the most important expression of their ideas, and their commitment to empowering people to participate actively in the arts and the cultural life of the community, a phrase that made deliberate reference to article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. They adopted the term cultural democracy to describe what they were doing, especially in the UK, in France and in the USA, where it has older antecedents, while continuing to describe their practice as community arts or *action culturelle*. They did not speak of co-creation because the term did not exist.

In 1976, the case for people's right to be actors in a diverse cultural life had rarely been stronger, but the neoliberal revolution was already gathering. The Oslo Resolutions drew on democratic and social values that would be severely tested if not entirely overthrown by political, economic, social and cultural change in the 1980s and subsequent decades. In addition to the well-known aspects of this ideology, two have had a particularly strong impact on community art and emerging claims of cultural democracy.

One is the commodification and commercialisation of culture (anticipated in Principles VII and VIII in the Oslo Resolutions) which has increased art's economic, social and political importance, but at the cost of democratic oversight, participation or debate. The other is the rise of individualism and a parallel weakening of collective forms of social action, including the practice of community development that was a cornerstone of community art. This contributed to the rebranding of community art as participatory art²⁷ in the 1990s, in a process with parallels in the emergence of co-creation as a label of choice over the last decade.

3 THE FRAGMENTATION OF CULTURAL POLICY: THE 1990s TO THE PRESENT

3.1 The normalisation of participatory art

In *A Restless Art*, I argue that participatory art has become normalised in the past 20 years, an assessment broadly shared by the authors of *Cultural Policies in Europe: A Participatory Turn?* (2020).²⁸ The idea that participation has become central to art and culture might seem paradoxical, given the political change just noted, but the meaning given to participation is very different,

and its rebranding as co-creation is both a mark and a cover for that change. Be that as it may, the growth of cultural participation is undeniable.

One striking example is the British government's decision to commemorate the centenary of the First World War through art commissions with a high degree of public participation. According to 14-18 Now (the organisation established to manage the programme) 107 artistic projects in more than 220 locations across the UK, reached a total of 35 million people.²⁹ Many of the commissions—e.g. Jeremy Deller's 'We're Here Because We're Here', Artichoke's 'Processions' and Danny Boyle's 'Pages of the Sea'—involved mass participation, though in tightly controlled forms. 14-18 Now raises many questions about the relationship between art and the state, but it is undeniably a sign of the political and social importance that participatory art has acquired in recent years. It is also striking that 14-18 Now was financed and overseen by the political party that was so hostile to public spending on the arts (especially community art) in the 1980s, under Margaret Thatcher's premiership.

3.2 Economic and social policy engages with culture

The increase in funding, and therefore in public cultural supply, has been accompanied by a fragmentation, even a disintegration of cultural policy. Redefined as part of the cultural and creative industries (an ambiguous, not to say opaque, concept, which elides distinctions between commercial and non-commercial activity) the arts have become an increasingly important aspect of economic policy, with publicly-funded institutions riding the coat tails of wealth-generating sectors such as film, advertising and computer games. The idea of creative cities, promoted by advocates like Richard Florida, also captured policy-makers' imagination, giving new impetus to culture-led regeneration, and leading to the creation of new cultural infrastructure not seen since the 1950s or even the 1870s. Although the rhetoric of the creative economy has quietened since the 2008 financial crisis, the continuing interest of policy-makers in these ideas is evident in the scale of cultural recovery funds invested by many rich nations during the Covid 19 pandemic.

Meanwhile, the idea of cultural democratisation continues to guide public policy in most European countries, largely unquestioned by professionals, politicians or the public, and protected by long-held beliefs about cultural value and hierarchies. Its only alternative, cultural democracy, vanished from the policy lexicon in the 1990s, when communism collapsed and a triumphant neoliberalism celebrated the end of history, somewhat prematurely as it turned out. Community art became participatory art and secured its future by evidencing the social impact that it had been producing for decades.³⁰ That was important in a wider policy context, and led to participatory art being funded

from education, social services and health budgets, but it also encouraged some policy-makers and critics to see participation as a social, not an artistic concern. With cultural democracy in retreat, if not in hiding, democratisation remained the only basis for public cultural policy, despite the incursion of other fields, such as economics, into culture.

Nonetheless, the criticisms of cultural democratisation remain, and there are signs that what hold it had on the public imagination is waning. Recent decades have seen a steady rise in democracy, education, leisure, prosperity and social diversity in Europe, contributing not only to culture's importance, but changing how people see and engage with it. In the 1970s, community artists spoke of wanting to put the means of cultural production into the hands of working people. That has happened, and far more profoundly than they imagined, thanks to the revolution in information and communication technology and the inexorable rise of consumerism: together, they have brought unprecedented access to the means of publication, distribution and critique.

Old hierarchies, in which opera was the pinnacle of the arts, are crumbling, not under the attacks of community artists but, as Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker suggest, from the indifference of citizens faced with a seemingly limitless supply of cultural product. In a saturated, aggressive cultural market place, the customer's attention is won with money and drama. Art that reveals its value slowly and requires some effort of co-creation on the part of its audience is outgunned by computer generated imagery. The result is not only the marginalisation of much that was long held to be the best that human beings have thought, said and created. It may also mean the decline of culture as a space where values are negotiated and its replacement by one of mere consumption—neither cultural democratisation nor cultural democracy but cultural pacification.

3.3 Cultural policy without policy

It is in this context that participation is seen as the solution, or at least part of it, by those who defend established cultural values and the policy of cultural democratisation. This appears in Arts Council England's strategy for 2020-30, *Let's Create*. Here, the 75-year-old state cultural funding body bases its 'case for change' on the fact 'that there are still widespread socio-economic and geographic variances in levels of engagement with publicly funded culture'³¹, accepting, in effect, the inequalities reported by Brook *et al*. It goes on to make a distinction between *creativity*, which it describes as making a work of art, and *culture*, which it sees as the result of that creation. The meaningfulness of this distinction is open to question, but what matters is Arts Council England's intention that everyone should have access to both kinds of opportunities—to

engage with culture *and* to make art. It uses the principles of cultural democracy (although it does not use the term) when it says that:

The vision of this Strategy, therefore, is of a country in which the creativity of everyone living here is celebrated and supported: in which culture forms and transforms communities, and in which cultural institutions are inclusive of all of us, so that whoever we are and wherever we live, we can share in their benefits.³²

In the same document, Arts Council England states that:

We do not believe that certain types or scales of creative activity are inherently better or of greater value than others: excellence can be found in village halls and concert halls, and in both the process of participation and the work that is produced.³³

This represents a historic change of position for a state cultural institution. For half a century, community artists have tried unsuccessfully to persuade the Arts Council that everyone can be an artist and that the process of participation can be as valuable as the art it produces. In a sentence or two, that principle is accepted and, what is more, cultural hierarchies are abolished. But if no cultural activity is 'inherently better or of greater value than others', on what basis does a cultural institution such as ACE make its spending decisions? Its investment principles—'Ambition and Quality', 'Inclusivity and Relevance', 'Dynamism' and 'Environmental Responsibility'—are so vague and well-meaning as to justify almost any choices. Who could oppose them? Is this performative policy-making or a coherent statement of belief and intent?

Cultural policy in a post-political age

Allowing for differences in tone, and the cautious language of a public funding institution, *Let's Create* is close to the vision of the Oslo Resolutions (but 45 years late). If, using ACE's own terms, that results in everyone's artistic creativity being celebrated and supported, it would indeed be a radical and positive change. But is this more than the good intentions so characteristic of cultural democratisation? Neither ACE's 10-year strategy, nor the delivery plan it published in April 2021, mentions community art, participatory art or co-creation. Even the word participation appears rarely and not usually in the context of artistic creation. And yet, two years before publishing *Let's Create*, Arts Council England seemed to endorse these practices when it commissioned and published a report entitled *Cultural Democracy in Practice*, with many examples of participatory practice. Here co-creation is described as:

A term that reflects a mutually beneficial relationship, maximising the expertise of everyone in the room, to create a process or product that everyone has played an active role in. It is a simple concept that generates outcomes that all contributors can feel proud of.³⁴

The suggestion that co-creation is a simple concept perfectly illustrates the problem of cultural policy in a post-political age. For two centuries, two large and complex visions of culture were in competition, each rooted in a sophisticated analysis of the nature, value and social role of art. From the elite came a vision of culture as civilising, universal and unifying, in which access to its finest resources was the principal goal, and the path of self-improvement. To this, working people opposed a broader, more generous culture that could empower individuals *and* groups, and which saw a democratic significance in debate about ideas, tastes and values. Each vision reflected the interests of different social groups and could therefore be developed, implemented and contested as forms of cultural policy.

Today, to judge from Arts Council England's strategy document, neither tradition seems to be properly understood by those making cultural policy. Nor do they have an alternative political theory to offer. We are left with no more than good intentions in the place of the democratically accountable exercise of power.

¹ <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/> This right has since been affirmed and expanded in a succession of further international treaties: see Anderson, J. 2010: 14

² Abbate, C., & Parker, R., 2015. *A History of Opera*, London: Penguin, p. 38

³ Cf. Shiner, L., 2003, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History*, Chicago

⁴ Bourdieu, P., 1984, *Distinction*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press

⁵ In 1836, Charles Darwin believed that 'It is impossible for an Englishman to behold these distant colonies without a high pride and satisfaction. To hoist the British flag seems to draw with it as a certain consequence, wealth, prosperity, and civilisation.' Salmi, H., 2008. *Nineteenth-Century Europe: A Cultural History*, Cambridge: Polity Press, p. 114

⁶ Matarasso, F., 2019, *A Restless Art, How Participation Won and Why it Matters*, London: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation pp.136-37

⁷ Arnold, M., 1993, *Culture and Anarchy and other writings*, ed. S. Collini Cambridge: CUP

⁸ Liebersohn, H., 2016, 'Introduction: The Civilizing Mission', *Journal of World History*, Vol. 27, No. 3, University of Hawaii Press, p. 383

⁹ Rose, J., 2010, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, New Haven

¹⁰ Maleuvre, D., 2016, *The Art of Civilisation, A Bourgeois History*, New York: Palgrave, p. 9 (emphasis in original).

-
- ¹¹ Weingartner, J., 2012, *Arts as a Weapon of War*, London: I. B. Tauris
- ¹² Judt, T., 2010, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945*, London: Random House, Kindle location: 8322
- ¹³ Fleury, L., 2016, *Sociologie de la culture et des pratiques culturelles*, Paris : Armand Colin (Kindle Edition) « un projet de conversion du public à des formes symboliques valorisées qui suppose une stratégie de prosélytisme tournée vers les masses et au service des œuvres savantes ou lettrées, en se donnant pour objectif de faire pratiquer au plus grand nombre la fréquentation et le culte des œuvres jugées légitimes »
- ¹⁴ Weingartner 2012, Kindle location 2209
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Matt Peacock, a member of Traction’s international Advisory committee, founded Street-wise Opera to work with people experiencing homelessness in 2001. His work was a response to a notorious remark by Sir George Young MP, then a Conservative Housing Minister, who had told the BBC that the homeless were the ‘people you step over when you leave the opera’ (Radio 4 Today Programme, 29 June 1991).
- ¹⁷ Timmins, N., 2017, *The Five Giants, A Biography of the Welfare State*, 3rd ed. London: HarperCollins, Kindle location 10103
- ¹⁸ The UK Government’s Taking Part Survey reports that the ‘proportion of respondents who had engaged with the arts in the last 12 months’ was 76% in 2019/20, exactly where it was in 2005/06 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/taking-part-201920-arts/arts-taking-part-survey-201920> (accessed 27.4.2021)
- ¹⁹ Brook, O., O’Brien, D., & Taylor, M., 2020, *Culture is bad for you: Inequality in the cultural and creative industries*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, p. 108
- ²⁰ Brook, O’Brien & Taylor 2020: 179. See also Carey, H., O’Brien, D., Gable, O., 2021 *Screened out: Tackling class inequality in the UK’s screen industries*, London: The Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre, which considers barriers to social mobility in the much larger field of the creative industries.
- ²¹ James, C., 2007, *Cultural Amnesia: Notes in the Margin of My Time*, London: Picador, p. xxi
- ²² CDs of the aptly titled ‘Memory Almost Full’ were given away free with the Mail on Sunday on 10 May 2008: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-565501/Free-CD-inside-weeks-Mail-Sunday-Paul-McCartneys-Memory-Almost-Full.html>
- ²³ Abbate & Parker 2015: 515
- ²⁴ « C’est [...] notre attitude même à l’égard de la culture qui se trouve mise en question de la façon la plus radicale. Quelle que soit la pureté de nos intentions, cette attitude apparait en effet à une quantité considérable de nos concitoyens comme une option faite par des privilégiés en faveur d’une culture héréditaire, particulariste, c’est-à-dire tout simplement bourgeoise. » *La Déclaration de Villeurbanne*: <https://sht.asso.fr/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/1-villeurbanne-declaration.pdf>
- ²⁵ « Car il est maintenant tout à fait clair qu’aucune définition de la culture ne sera valable, n’aura de sens, qu’au prix d’apparaître utile aux intéressés eux-mêmes. » *La Déclaration de Villeurbanne*: <https://sht.asso.fr/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/1-villeurbanne-declaration.pdf>
- ²⁶ Council of Europe, 1976, *Oslo 1976, Report of the Conference*, Strasbourg, pp.151-2
- ²⁷ Matarasso 2013
- ²⁸ Matarasso 2019: 19-29; Dupin-Meynard, F., & Négrier, E., eds., 2020, *Cultural Policies in Europe: a Participatory Turn?*, Toulouse: Éditions de l’Attribut

-
- ²⁹ Waldman, J. ed., 2019, *14-18 NOW: Contemporary arts commissions for the First World War centenary*, London: Profile Editions; <https://www.1418now.org.uk>
- ³⁰ Matarasso, F. 1997, *Use or Ornament? The Social Impact of Participation in the Arts*, Stroud: Comedia; Matarasso 2013.
- ³¹ ACE, 2020, *Let's Create, Strategy 2020-2030* London: Arts Council England, p. 9
- ³² ACE 2020: 62
- ³³ ACE 2020: 47
- ³⁴ 64 Million Artists, 2018 *Cultural Democracy in Practice*, London: Arts Council England, p. 12