Culture and Class

John Holden

counterpoint

Class is the strongest determinant of participation in culture and in turn, culture is a crucial marker of social difference. So does culture increase social mobility or reinforce class division? Answering this question could hold the key to understanding the widening income gap between different social groups worldwide. Yet the debate about culture and class is far from centre-stage.

Using the UK as a case study, *Culture and Class* sets out a democratic definition of culture for the coming times, and argues for a change in perspective from product to people – from widening access to an enshrined canon, to building the citizen's capacity both to appreciate and to create. This shift opens the way for culture to help break down class divisions and inequalities, by empowering and enfranchising people across society to be both creators and consumers of culture.

Encouraging a culture that isn't just *available* to everyone, but is *produced* by everyone is, the author argues, a crucial first step towards a more egalitarian society.

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Preface

The influential French sociologist of culture, Pierre Bourdieu, famously referred to an 'economy of cultural goods'. Inequalities in that type of economy, he argued, affect people and their life chances as much as the inequalities of income we are more used to reflecting upon. And as Wilkinson and Pickett argue in their book *The Spirit Level*, the 'ways in which class and taste and snobbery work to constrain people's opportunities and well-being are, in reality, painful and pervasive'.[1] Yet, shamefully, at a time when we know that the gap between rich and poor is at its widest, worldwide, and likely to widen as the economic recession deepens, we are entirely failing to address the direct role played by culture in perpetuating these distinctions. Culture is an emancipatory tool. We know that cultural production, access and fun are among the most effective tools we can use to eradicate inequalities of all types – yet the debate about the potential of culture is deafening by its absence. This double failure – we know and yet fail to act – is at the heart of the matter.

The way culture operates as a factor both in liberation and constraint is uniquely configured in different societies around the world. This pamphlet revisits the issue of culture and class in the UK. Here, the deeply established role of culture and the popular identification with class despite growing economic freedoms for most, suggests our story will lack neither paradox nor contradiction. And it doesn't. John Holden's exploration highlights Britain's failures as well as its

strengths. Ours is still a political, social and cultural system defined by distinctions of class (Kate Fox's *Watching the English*[2] is a sobering reminder of the power of class markers in our society). But, Britain is also a hub of cultural creativity and opportunity. Indeed one of the most uncomfortable facts about the UK is the somewhat disconcerting relationship between the deep-seatedness of its class structure and the vibrancy of its creative sector. There is an unpalatable paradox here of a society that might, to many, seem more ruthless in its labour market but more capable of reinventing itself; more ungrateful towards its workers, but also more understanding of risk-taking; more immobile and yet more open and innovative. What this pamphlet proposes is that we move beyond this paradox and search for ways in which we might – instead of snatching creativity from the teeth of ruthlessness and threat – support our cultural sectors, increase access to cultural arenas, sustain and nurture our creative industries in a concerted and systematic way in order to guarantee the equal access and participation that can drive real social progress and maintain the vibrancy of its cultural production.

In their controversial 2009 book *The Death of French Culture*,[3] Donald Morrison and Antoine Compagnon report from the cultural front lines on the asphyxiation of French culture by its own elite – its reluctance to open up to the world, its bureaucratic and protectionist tendencies, in other words its obsessive navel-gazing that spells, according to the authors, the death of France as a cultural power. Culture in the UK, as pointed out by John Holden in this pamphlet, doesn't suffer from this – yet. It thrives on its openness, on its multiplicity and on the curiosity and willingness of the 'new cosmopolitans' to mix old and new, homegrown and 'exotic', popular and high-brow. Culture in the UK, in other words, is still

a reflection of the reality of Britain in the twenty-first century. Yet, alarmingly, and as pointed out by Gunnell and Bright in their 2010 Arts Council England report, *Creative Survival in Hard Times*, employment in the creative industries is in danger of becoming the preserve of a certain, exclusive class. This pamphlet outlines why it is crucial that we avoid this and why the future of the UK depends on our committing to forging a new relationship between culture and class.

The temptation, in light of new and urgent divisions (generational, environmental, geographical) is to 'move beyond' class as an interpretative lens – partly out of laziness, partly out of misplaced idealism. Yet attending to these new divisions, embedded as they are in our cultural frameworks, requires a collective commitment that can emerge only from shared understanding through shared channels of communication – cultural access is the underpinning principle to addressing every other global challenge we face.

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John Holden, September 2010

1

Introduction

That country is the richest, which nourishes the greatest number of noble and happy human beings.[4]

Ruskin, 'Unto this Last', 1860

During his speech at the final Labour Party Conference of the twentieth century, Tony Blair told his audience: 'My friends, the class war is over.' It is worth asking who won. Blair himself was certainly a winner – he is now reputedly worth £30 million – and ten years on from his speech, atavistic attitudes to class are starting to appear. When David Cameron arrived in Number Ten as Britain's new Prime Minister, a headline in the *London Evening Standard* blithely stated: 'Born and Bred to Rule.'[5]

The class war may or may not be over, but last year London Mayor Boris Johnson told us that we are definitely caught up in another conflict – a culture war. Coincidently using similar phraseology to Tony Blair, he wrote in the *Daily Telegraph*: 'We are in a kulturkampf my friends, and the barbarians are winning.'[6] He is right, though deciding who the barbarians are is not so simple as he thinks.

In this culture war, battles are raging on two fronts: the first concerns who has access to what has traditionally been defined as 'culture', and the second is about who gets to decide what 'culture' is in the first place. These are not mere disputes over aesthetics and artistic quality; questions about culture are questions about power and freedom. Culture and class are intimately bound together, and both are highly politicised: Boris's

newspaper article was titled 'Here's a really right-wing idea: learn poetry' – a contention that will surprise many poets and their readers.

This essay examines the relationship between culture and class in today's Britain and discovers a paradox: the possession of cultural capital enhances an individual's social mobility, but cultural capital is itself predicated on culture as a marker of social difference. As the Japanese academic Nobuko Kawashima notes: 'It is actually one of the functions of culture to legitimise and enhance social inequality.'[7] Does 'culture' then increase social mobility or reinforce class division? The answer to that conundrum lies in the changing nature of 'cultural capital' and in the ways that culture itself is changing.

Status, education, wealth and culture march together, so one way of helping the disadvantaged is to increase their cultural capital. However, cultural capital no longer resides in a cultural canon, but instead is found in a set of cultural capacities. In other words, cultural capital these days is not so much about 'appreciating' a Leonardo, or feeling comfortable at a Mahler concert, it is more about having an interest in, and feeling relaxed with, all sorts of culture and cultures. But instead of being a re-invention of old-style cosmopolitanism – where a detached and independently wealthy *flâneur* was content to observe life going on around him – the new cosmopolitanism involves action, production and participation. Whereas the old cosmopolitan felt at home in the elite cultures of different cities, the new cosmopolitan is at ease with different cultures in her own city.

Globalisation, the internet, and the proliferation of media encourage the understanding and enjoyment of a broader culture, and it follows that, as more and more people join this movement, the idea of what constitutes culture expands, so that it travels beyond Mahler and into jazz, Indian raga, pop and so on. But more significantly,

as more people start to produce and consume culture, their activity becomes a mass democratic project. Culture is created by millions of individual and collective decisions, rather than flowing from the tastes and preferences of only one part of society.

In order to examine the relationship between culture and class, this essay will therefore need to address what is happening in 'high' or 'legitimate' culture, and look at who decides what that type of culture is and who has access to it. But the scope will have to be much wider as well, examining how what we now regard as culture is increasingly being created in the marketplace and in the practices of everyday life.

Although this essay concentrates on what is happening in the UK, many of the arguments apply elsewhere. There are no easily comparable data covering the UK, the rest of Europe, North America, Australia and beyond, but in some instances researchers have found that similar patterns apply. For example, US and European studies show lower-income groups or manual workers attending theatre and opera less frequently than higher-income groups; the importance of education as a predictive factor in attendance of 'high' cultural events is common though not universal. Where possible, international comparisons will be used to help elucidate the relationship between culture and class, with the cautionary note that although we live in a globalised world, differences abound between nations and groups within them – and of course, culture is one of the ways in which we recognise and express those differences. Governments and cultural institutions help set the terms for the interplay between culture and class, and this essay concludes with some suggestions about what they can do to help people create a culture that is more open and inclusive, more democratically created and defined, and where all classes can meet on more equal terms.

Why now?

The words culture and class are difficult, each of them caught in a tangle of contemporary confusion and carrying a great deal of historical baggage. Moreover, many giants, from Theodor Adorno and Pierre Bourdieu to Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams have trodden the ground already.

But the relationship between culture and class is always on the move, and so needs regular re-examination. There are compelling reasons to attempt the task now: class conflict has re-emerged as a blight on British society, the gap between rich and poor has reached levels last seen in the 1850s, and the most disadvantaged are ill-served by a culture that can abuse, exploit, patronise, exclude and ignore them.

Britain's current economic woes provide additional reasons to give the topic of culture and class another airing, for a number of reasons. First, the cultural and creative economy is predicted to grow faster than the rest of the economy.[8] This is a reason to be cheerful, but it begs the question of who reaps the benefit, as it is difficult for the poor to find routes into employment in the creative industries, as a recent report from New Deal of the Mind has found: 'Employment in the creative industries is becoming the prerogative of the privileged.'[9]

Second, when recessions occur, and public sector cuts follow, there is generally a retreat into small-c conservative culture. As a result, the public get cultural comfort food, and elites re-establish their economic, social and cultural dominance. There is a distinct danger that there will be less interesting work done in both the public and commercial cultural sectors, and that the audiences for that work will narrow.

But the problem is not simply about what culture gets produced and who gets to see it or hear it. No one should

be excluded from any sort of cultural activity, but more importantly, as a matter of social justice, nor should they be excluded from helping to define what culture means.

Culture is a shared endeavour: a new understanding built on the cultures of the past and created by the people of today to hand on to those of tomorrow. When one part of society cannot take part in that collective project, they suffer, and so does the rest of society.

Conversely, cultural *inclusion* has a positive effect. It generates social capital – despite the fact that individual cultural acts or movements can have socially destructive consequences. In turn, as Dr David Halpern, the former chief analyst in the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit, argues in *The Hidden Wealth of Nations*, social capital produces both economic prosperity and wellbeing.[10] In the United States, the author and journalist Dick Stanley has noted a similar iterative relationship between the cultural citizen and society: 'An individual's cultural participation influences how she behaves toward others in society, and their cultural participation influences how they treat her. Culture permeates social, economic and political action.'[11]

Cultural inclusion creates non-financial bonds and transactions between people, and these are just as significant as monetary exchange to the way that a society functions. Being part of a culture strengthens social ties and builds human capital, and the Nobel Prize winning economist Joseph Stiglitz and his colleagues have recently suggested that governments need to take more account of such 'non-market produced goods' in national accounts.[12]

Culture is thus emerging, not as a subset of politics and the economy, but as one of the determining factors of how politics and the economy function. It is important, therefore, that in a democratic

society everyone should be able to contribute to what culture is and what it means, because cultural inclusion in both senses – familiarity with existing culture, and being part of the project to create contemporary culture – alters the prospects both for individuals and for society.

2

The basic concepts

There are in fact no masses, only ways of seeing people as masses.[13]

Raymond Williams, 'Culture is ordinary', 1958

Class

After many years in the wilderness, the discussion of class as a divisive and malign influence in British society is firmly back on the agenda. For many years it seemed to have gone away. In the run-up to the 1964 general election, Harold Wilson toured the country promoting his vision of a 'classless society'. Later prime ministers were to echo the theme: John Major wrote in 1990 that 'we will... continue to make changes which will make the whole of this country a genuinely classless society'.[14]

During those decades, it seemed as if Britain's enfeebling obsession with class, and the corrosive reality of a divided society, were on the wane. Not any more. Class has returned, firmly placed on the agenda both by the media in the run-up to the General Election, and in Gordon Brown's Prime Ministerial New Year message for 2010, which referred darkly to the 'privileged few'.

The phrase harks back to a 1950s Britain where power, advantage and money were closely guarded: the then Prime Minister Harold Macmillan was educated at Eton and Oxford, married to the daughter of the Duke of Devonshire, and connected by family or marriage to seven members of his own Cabinet. Thirty-five men in his government were old Etonians.

Some things have changed. Class divisions are no longer between fairly homogenous groups of upper, middle and working class. Instead, there are financial

divisions between the super-rich, who have incomes and assets beyond the dreams of most of the population; the prosperous middle class; the aspirant middle class; the working class; and the non-working poor, sometimes referred to as 'the underclass'.

Instead of class distribution being conceived as a triangle, with the working class at the base and upper class at the peak, it has now become, in financial terms, an ovoid, with the super-rich at one end, and the underclass at the other. Both ends of the ovoid are alienated from society. At the top end, many of the super-rich believe they should pay no tax, and they opt out of public services by choice; at the bottom end, the underclass are alienated from a polity that has failed them. This explains why much recent commentary about class has focused on the middle – the people who were and are most likely to vote.[15]

The middle classes are becoming increasingly resentful of the super-rich, partly because boardroom rewards are now disconnected from performance and are therefore seen as greedy and undeserved, and partly because, as the super-rich soar ahead, they damage the prospects of middle-class children being able to achieve the material standards of their parents.

The consequences of a divided society are clear. As a recent report from the National Equalities Panel put it, 'wide inequalities erode the bonds of common citizenship and the recognition of human dignity across economic divides'.[16] Polly Toynbee and David Walker have meticulously set out in *Unjust Rewards* how the rich know very little about the poor, and the level of ignorance is undoubtedly mutual.[17] In this respect, nothing has changed since the public school and Cambridge-educated Tom Harrison and Charles Madge set off for Bolton in 1937, to find out how the working classes lived in their anthropological Mass Observation project.

In some ways things have got worse since the 1950s: 'Britain is an unequal country, more so than many other industrialised countries and more so than it was a generation ago.'[18] A recent crop of books by academics, including Tony Judt's *Ill Fares the Land*,[19] Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett's *The Spirit Level*,[20] and Daniel Dorling's *Injustice: Why social inequality persists*,[21] provide overwhelming evidence that Britain is profoundly unequal. According to the UN, we rank fourth among industrialised countries in terms of income inequality, and London is said to be the most unequal city in the developed world.[22]

The question of whether inequality causes or merely correlates with social problems has not been finally settled, but what does seem certain is that, in spite of strong evidence of a causal link, many people will never be persuaded. As Daniel Dorling, Professor of Human Geography at Sheffield, says: 'Britain is addicted to inequality.'[23]

This country's attitude to inequality conforms to the observation of Nancy Krieger, from the Harvard School of Public Health, that 'for injustice to flourish, inequality must appear as natural, normal, innate and inevitable'.[24] To many, inequality does appear natural, and as a result, injustice does flourish.

But while a lot of attention is being paid to income inequality and its consequences, there is less discussion about the cultural aspects of inequality. Class, which determines and describes one's position in the hierarchies of society, is both an economic and a cultural phenomenon, and as will be seen in section 3, our addiction to inequality is expressed and becomes apparent partly through our culture.

Culture

Many writers and commentators have noted that the word culture is used both in an anthropological sense, to encompass all of the practices and behaviours that give shared meaning to the lives of a distinct group, and also as a synonym for 'the arts'. The problem of these two muddled meanings is further complicated by the fact that within one culture there may be many subcultures, with individuals identifying simultaneously with a number of different groups – for example as both Jewish and Punk, or Japanese and Rockabilly. Having one word to describe different things causes problems, to such a degree that Bill Ivey, the former head of the National Endowment for the Arts in the United States has suggested we should ditch the word 'culture' altogether.[25] But it continues to be used, and while the elision of culture as anthropology and culture as 'the arts' is regrettable, it is unavoidable.

In *Democratic Culture*, a 2008 Demos publication, I tried to describe what 'culture' means today, and suggested that one way that it can be understood is as a group of three distinct but highly integrated spheres of activity.[26] These three spheres are 'publicly funded culture', 'commercial culture' and 'homemade culture'.

The first two, funded culture and commercial culture, have lived in historic opposition, and throughout the twentieth century a series of writers, including TS Eliot, FR Leavis and Kingsley Amis contrasted the glories of high culture on the one hand and the debased forms of 'popular culture' on the other. In shorthand, as John Maynard Keynes put it in 1945 when announcing the establishment of the Arts Council of Great Britain: 'Death to Hollywood.'[27]

However, as a new and more affluent society emerged in the postwar period, the art critic Lawrence Alloway began to argue that the contrast between 'high' and 'popular' culture was becoming increasingly untenable:

Our definition of culture is being stretched beyond the fine art limits imposed on it by Renaissance theory, and refers now, increasingly, to the whole complex of human activities. Within this definition, rejection of the mass-produced arts is not, as critics think, a defence of culture but an attack on it.[28]

Publicly funded culture and commercial culture in fact have much in common. They are both defined by the decisions of gatekeepers: access to the 'marketplace' is controlled in the former case by public servants and bureaucrats, and by commercial producers, editors, publishers and the like in the latter. Publicly funded and commercial culture often employ the same artists and technicians, and to some degree each creates an audience for the other.

The third sphere, homemade culture, is entwined with the other two types of culture, but differs from them in significant ways. In homemade culture there are no gatekeepers, especially now that cultural 'product' can easily be distributed on the internet. Moreover, the barriers to entry and collaboration in homemade culture have been lowered. It is much easier to produce your own 'culture' because cheap and easy-to-use musical instruments and cameras are available, and they have become more integrated into everyday life. There are also more performance spaces than there were, thanks to an extensive lottery-funded building programme over the last 15 years, and more ways of forming and organising groups such as choirs and reading clubs via websites and emails.

The Voluntary Arts Network estimates that over half the UK population is now involved in some form of art or craft; there are 50,000 formal amateur arts groups in the UK with nine million members.[29] The phenomenon is in fact global, from the *casas de cultura* of South America to the culture clubs of South Korea via the *chitalishta* of Bulgaria.

In the US there is a trend away from simply watching or listening, and towards taking part:

Tens of millions of people attend concerts, plays, opera, and museum exhibitions, yet the percentage of the US population attending these arts events is shrinking, and the decline is noticeable. On the increase, however, is the percentage of the American public personally creating art (e.g. music making, and drawing). Technology is changing how Americans experience the arts and consumption via technology and social media is also up.[30]

But homemade culture has not just increased in *scale* in the last two decades, it has changed in *character*. Now, almost everyone has the ability to communicate what they produce, to attain 'professional standards', and to be rewarded, whether they label themselves as artists or musicians or not.

The very recent change in the cultural landscape brought about by homemade culture has had a profound effect. It has created more demand and therefore more activity in the commercial and funded spheres. The rise of the creative and cultural industries has encouraged more people – especially the young – to believe that they can make a living from culture, and the homemade sphere is where they start.

But the rise of homemade culture has also changed the political and social importance of culture. Now, instead of each of the three spheres of culture being marginal to life and to politics – with high culture dismissed as elitist recreation, commercial culture condemned as entertainment, and homemade culture patronised as 'amateur' – when taken together they have become what Jordi Marti, Head of Culture in Barcelona, has called the second ecosystem of humankind.

Being part of this cultural world has thus become of much greater significance for everyone. Our individual

identities are formed in large part by what we choose to listen to, read, watch, sing and play. Our social bonds are now formed by cultural choices as much as by work or geography or religion. In turn, just as culture shapes us individually, so we shape culture collectively through our interests, decisions, purchases and activities. In this sense, in the postwar era, culture has become an increasingly democratic project.

That sense of a dynamic relationship between the individual and culture, with each influencing the other, is reflected in another idea found in the root of the word culture: the notion of cultivation and growth.

In the nineteenth century, Matthew Arnold described the improving effects of progressing from darkness to 'sweetness and light', where the 'cultivated' person becomes morally better through being initiated into particular forms and examples of culture.[31]

Nowadays, cultivation needs to be thought of differently, as a progressive growth in learning and confidence that results in an individual being able to contribute to the development of culture, rather than merely 'appreciating' what already exists.

Finally, one further aspect of culture should be noted at this stage, and that is the blurring of the division between cultural consumers and producers, between audiences and artists that has taken place recently. In the last century the public and the artist were two different parts of the cultural community, separated by the proscenium arch and the TV screen. Artists and arts administrators increased the distance by becoming increasingly professionalised, and some went so far as to define their artistry in terms of their opposition to the general public. Technology emphasised the division by helping to turn the vast majority of the population into passive consumers of film, radio and TV.

But the stark divide between cultural producer and consumer was always false. Culture has at all times been created in the space where the two meet; when the knowledge, prejudices and world views of the audience confront those of the artist, and the artist responds. In the new homemade-culture world of mass creativity and instant feedback, the realisation that culture is brought about through interaction is becoming increasingly apparent.

This understanding of culture as something constantly created and reinvented through dialectic has implications for how governments treat culture. 'Culture' is not something that governments can 'deliver'. It is not like a road-building programme or an unemployment benefit. Just as the Department for Health does not 'deliver' health, so the Department for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport does not deliver culture. Both health and culture are formed through decisions and choices made by individuals in the context of what the private and public sector make available. Governments can partially set the terms for how culture develops through a policy framework of commercial regulation, town planning, arts funding, personal taxation, property rights, curriculum content and so on. In turn those policies affect institutional and business choices, which then provide the raw materials from which people make their culture.

3

Culture and class together

The era of different classes having easily identifiable and separate cultures is long gone. Working class culture, as understood in the twentieth century, arose from a particular combination of circumstances: towns where there was one dominant industry and a football team with players taken from the backstreets, a mutual building society bearing the town's name, a local brewery, bakery and newspaper owned by prominent families whom everyone knew. Even the bus colours adopted by local authorities gave a sense of distinctiveness, pride and solidarity. All of these have gone. One of the fathers of Cultural Studies, Richard Hoggart, was mourning their decline as long ago as 1957 in his book *The Uses of Literacy*,[32] but since then they have entirely disappeared, taking with them the pillars of working-class cultural self-help such as reading rooms, and non-vocational adult education. In *Mind the Gap*, the writer and columnist Ferdinand Mount provides a detailed account of how working-class institutions were attacked by writers and intellectuals throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[33] They have also been destroyed by globalisation, financial markets and changes in local government.

But more positively, a distinctive working-class culture disappeared because increasing wealth and improvements in production and distribution meant that what had been luxury consumption became democratised. The affluent teenagers of the 1950s and 1960s grew up to demand the range and quality of

goods – and the experiences – that their 'social superiors' had enjoyed. In doing so, they gained not just in material ways, but in self-assurance. Class deference became much less prevalent partly because of the cultural confidence gained by walking into shops, colleges and theatres that had previously been out of bounds.

Just as there is no longer an easily definable working-class culture, it is equally true to say that what was thought of as 'high culture' is neither the mark of, nor the exclusive preserve of the wealthiest echelons of society. There are plenty of multi-millionaires who don't give a fig for drama or dance, and plenty more who happily listen to hip-hop – and some of them made their millions from hip-hop. Although social groups and peer approval are still important in forming our cultural choices, what we read, watch and listen to is much more individualised than it used to be, and there is much less cultural determinism flowing from the geography of where people live, what they do for a living, or where they went to school.

One response to the increasing complexity of the links between culture and class has been to adopt sophisticated ways of 'segmenting' the population. Instead of concentrating on economic inequality, or attempting to find out where the lines can be drawn between working, middle and upper classes, analysts in both private sector market research and in publicly funded arts audience research have produced new methods to categorise us as consumers.

Arts Council England's *Arts Audiences: Insight* report of 2008 comes up with 13 categories of cultural consumer, ranging from 'urban arts eclectic' to 'limited means, nothing fancy'. In the private and public sectors there are many geodemographic segmentation systems with snappy names like ACORN, CAMEO and MOSAIC – the latter divides the population into an amazing 67 different 'types'.[34]

Should we conclude from all this that there is now no difference between the culture enjoyed by the aristocrat and the teenager on a sink estate? Are we all so free-wheeling in our ability to choose from the wide range of cultural offerings that class makes no difference to our choices? Clearly not. There may be long-term-unemployed gallery-lovers, and the Queen may enjoy *Dad's Army* on the TV, but as Professor Tony Bennett and his colleagues point out in the most comprehensive and compelling academic assessment of the subject, published this year:

Our multiple correspondence analysis demonstrates, and other statistical techniques confirm, that cultural preferences track lines of social cleavage. This does not however assume a highly unified and uniform shape... The testimony of individual interviewees suggests that nuanced personal differences oscillate around core class patterns.[35]

Class certainly remains a factor when making cultural choices, in commercial culture as well as in publicly funded culture. Data from Arts Council England show that what used to be called 'high' culture is still disproportionately enjoyed by the better off and better educated (see Table 1).

Table 1 **Attendance and participation in at least one arts event by demographic subgroup.**

	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
Higher socio-economic groups			
Attend	76.6%	76.7%	76.7%
Participate	53.3%	52.0%	52.0%
Lower socio-economic groups			
Attend	52.4%	51.9%	53.8%
Participate	37.9%	36.9%	37.5%

Source: Oskala and Bunting, 2009[36]

The differences are stark, and over the last decade they have not been changing to any significant degree. The data continue to point to big class differences when it comes to culture. As Bennett concludes:

The working class in Britain is, in general, not engaged with high culture: it neither likes nor is interested in the items and genres of legitimate culture. Most notably, its members do not go extensively to art galleries, museums, theatre, classical concerts and the like.[37]

Although there are no directly comparable data, similar differences in cultural attendance between higher and lower socio-economic groups are noticeable across Europe and in the US. Figures from the EU for example show 58 per cent of 'managers' going to the theatre, but only 24 per cent of 'manual workers'.[38] In the US, those earning less that $10,000 a year are about a third as likely to attend the arts as someone earning more than $75,000.[39] But there are differences between countries. As a Europe-wide survey concludes:

Data on households' expenditure can be analysed taking into account the socio-economic situation of households. This information confirms the commonly held perception that cultural consumption is influenced by income. Nevertheless, it is interesting to see to which extent this impact can be observed in different countries. In some countries, cultural consumption grows steadily as income increases, while in others a big 'jump' is observed for households with the highest income.[40]

Just as class matters when it comes to cultural choices, so too do cultural choices affect class. As Kawashima says, 'museums or theatres have not caused poverty, but by being culturally exclusive, they have helped to institutionalise the socially excluded in a pernicious way'.[41] The academic Rosemary Crompton describes in her book *Class and Stratification* how, in most analyses of class, particular cultural practices are one of the main markers or components of class formation.[42] Just as people can be economically deprived and unequal, so too can they be culturally deprived and unequal. An inability to understand certain types of culture and the norms of behaviour associated with their enjoyment restricts an individual's social mobility and their chances in life.

In *Distinction*, his classic work of 1979, the sociologist and philosopher Pierre Bourdieu demonstrated the importance of 'cultural capital' in the acquisition and maintenance of social status, specifically in France.[43] The fact that there is a match between the possession of economic and cultural capital should not surprise us. If class is defined in cultural as well as economic terms it could hardly be otherwise, because people will tend to have a lot, or a little, of both.

The most recent data confirm the links between money, education and 'high' culture in the UK:

Possession of cultural capital is still a route to personal advancement and distinction... Although cultural capital achieves its effects in a different and differentiated manner, clothed in an inclusive ethic, it still helps the reproduction of the privilege of the professional–executive class.[44]

Just as cultural capital or the lack of it affects status, so too does the way that culture represents the poor and disadvantaged by reinforcing their position in society and confirming their low status and exclusion. The next section looks at ways that the poor are treated in, and by, our culture.

4

Ill-used by culture

Culture cuts a raw deal for the poorest in society. Historically culture has been used to reinforce social divisions and to distinguish one class from another. In today's world the picture is more complex, but there are many ways in which culture still excludes or exploits the poor.

Commercial culture

Commercial culture is like supermarket food: the range is vast, it is sourced on a global basis and it includes both staples and novelties. The more processed it is, the more profitable. It provides some extremely high-quality products at affordable prices – think Waitrose cheese counter and TV's *Mad Men* – but overall the population gets more obese, and more addicted to sugar and fat year by year.

Commercial culture disadvantages the poor in many ways, sometimes in the way they are portrayed, and sometimes in what they are offered. The most obvious examples are TV programmes like *Little Britain*, that caricature life on sink estates with relish and venom, inviting the audience to loathe and fear the (non-)working classes. Another way of dealing with the lower orders is through sentimentality, from *Upstairs, Downstairs* on TV, to *Blood Brothers* on the West End stage. Other commercial approaches to the poor include intrusion and mockery in many TV reality shows, commercial exploitation through recording contracts,

and big businesses ripping off street fashion and individual designers.

The poor are also patronised and treated as fools, although, as Richard Hoggart said: 'Some of us have been saying for many years that we, the audiences, the customers, the voters, are not as daft as those who seek our support often seem to assume.'[45]

Worst of all, middle-class, not to mention extraordinarily rich, pop musicians have offered the poor the message that there is no point in going to school. In the 1970s Pink Floyd sang 'We don't need no education... hey, teachers, leave them kids alone', and in 2008 the Kaiser Chiefs came up with the lyric 'It's cool to know nothing'. But it's not cool to know nothing. It's stupid. For individuals, being uneducated reduces their chances in life, and *en masse*, a population that knows nothing isn't capable of being a functioning democracy, however cool it may be.

One of the most pernicious aspects of popular culture has been to offer the poor a vision of success and happiness based on celebrity, material goods and money, in the form of reality TV and talent shows. Another has been to portray the poor as intractably 'other'. As Libby Brooks recently wrote in the *Guardian*:

Of course, decent television requires a strong narrative arc – be that the bampot behaviour of protagonists on The Scheme*, a local campaign for youth club funding on* Secret Millionaire*, or an MP's queasy stint in a rotting council flat in* Tower Block of Commons*. But what's missing from these primetime parables is the context for social dysfunction, the structural reasons why poverty persists, and any understanding that long-embedded life chances cannot be changed by the momentary intervention of a minor celebrity.*[46]

Publicly funded culture

The poor face many disadvantages in relation to publicly funded culture. First, they suffer from a kind of regressive taxation, in the form of lottery money being used to pay for pleasures in which they don't take part. Money moves from the poor to the rich, and from the regions to London. As the novelist and blogger Stewart Home said in 2000, 'to say that the current system of funding the arts is inequitable is to state the obvious'.[47]

Second, they find it difficult to enter the cultural workforce, since they are unable to take unpaid internships and are not connected to the social networks that provide routes into employment.

Third, they are invited to subscribe to, rather than shape, the culture that is on offer. But most of all, they are alienated. Arts events and arts institutions are uncomfortable places to be if you don't know the rules. The sociologist Richard Sennett argues that 'individuals cannot sustain a sense of their own worth if institutions neglect them', but how many arts institutions truly respect the disadvantaged?[48] Much attention has been paid to 'users' and 'audiences' by the arts sector but much less to non-users, or the self-excluded as one Arts Council England report dubs them.[49] But the relationship between these two categories, as opposed to the definitions of the categories themselves, is crucial.

Why would anyone want to go somewhere that insistently confirms their low status and reinforces a sense of inferiority? In the twenty-first century it is still possible to raise a laugh in the theatre by setting a play in the North and giving the actors funny accents to go with their eccentricities. As a result people feel patronised, unwelcome and excluded, or as Arts Council England puts it: 'The importance of social status suggests that some people feel uncomfortable attending arts events or do not perceive arts attendance as an

accessible or appropriate lifestyle choice.'[50] This matters beyond the cultural realm because, as the think-tanker Ben Rogers says 'our position in a social network has a deep effect on how we fare'.[51]

Unusual norms of behaviour apply in some contexts, and existing audiences, like church congregations, are not always welcoming. Writing about the recent revival of Tom Stoppard's play *The Real Thing* at the Old Vic, the journalist Richard Godwin tells us that 'the only character outside Henry's north London circle – a wild Glaswegian prole – seemed to serve solely as a symbol of the actress's folly... Most of the audience seemed to find her lobbing a bowl of dip in the poor man's face absolutely hilarious'.[52] The *Daily Mail* critic Quentin Letts was clearly in on the joke. He wrote about the play:

One is tempted to cheer as this magnificent defence of artistic elitism is fired at a London intelligentsia which has so idiotically fallen for patronising egalitarianism. There is little point in having publicly-funded theatres unless they encourage higher artistry. The creed of 'accessibility' is too often the enemy of art.[53]

The examples referred to above confirm that culture is part of the problem of class inequality, but a tantalising question presents itself: instead of affirming class divisions and perpetuating social advantage, could the field of culture offer a route out of disadvantage, not just for the occasional artist or performer, but for large numbers of people?

Deprivation tends to be multiple – unemployment, ill health, disability, poor educational performance and so on tend to overlap. Advantage also tends to be multiple. Could the role of culture be turned on its head, with a democratically determined and inclusive culture undermining rather than perpetuating social division? Could a re-imagining of culture as something that people

develop and create together reorient us towards the goal of a 'classless society'? And could the mass realisation of personal creativity offer a new economic model, producing a kind of capitalism that is not simply about increasing GDP and accumulating money, but about the growth of human capacities and the human spirit?

Such a project would involve navigating a route between the Scylla of social engineering projects, where the arts are co-opted as a means of changing people on the one hand, and the Charybdis of a dominant, static and backward-looking monoculture to which we might graciously be allowed access, on the other. Both statist compulsion and middle-class worthiness would have to be avoided. To continue the metaphor, such accomplished sailing will require a fair wind of political will, an accurate reading of the guiding stars through intellectual inquiry, and a strong and capable crew.

5

A new direction of travel

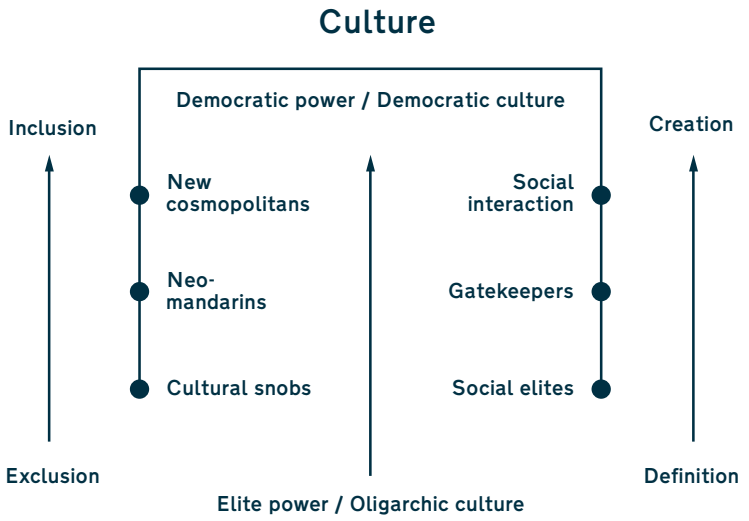
Oh it was a complicated business, loving art. It involved a lot more ill-will than one might have suspected.[54]

Nick Hornby, Juliet Naked, 2009

If the situation of the poor in relation to culture is to improve, then a twin-track approach is needed. On an individual basis people must be allowed and encouraged to increase their cultural capital, which helps their social mobility. But on a collective basis, culture needs to be created by everyone rather than defined by a narrow elite. This might seem contradictory, for surely increasing the cultural capital of one person, however much it might help the individual themselves, merely enlarges the elite and reinforces the existing order? The answer is, however, that if the overall culture is becoming more fluidly and liberally defined, then the existing cultural and social order will itself change. This is why cultural inclusion and exclusion on the one hand, and cultural definition and creation on the other, need to be considered in parallel. Taken together, both can be plotted on an axis between oligarchy and democracy.

The diagram in Figure 1 may help to explain the argument.

Figure 1 **Culture: from oligarchy to democracy**



Cultural inclusion and exclusion

The left side of the diagram shows how three different groups affect the ability of people in general to take part in the established culture of the arts and heritage, whether that culture exists within the publicly funded or commercial spheres.

Cultural snobs

The cultural snobs, a small but still influential group, are typified not only by their allegiance to certain art forms and periods, but by their insistence that only the already educated should enjoy them, an attitude typified by London-based art critic Brian Sewell who reportedly said:

A new exhibition by post-war artists, due to open on Tyneside, should be on display in the capital. 'By the very nature of the audience in London it is exposed to very much more art and culture and is therefore more sophisticated. There is no doubt about it.'[55]

In his essay 'The good enough visitor' Mark O'Neill, the former Head of Arts and Museums in Glasgow, charts the critical response to a number of exhibitions put on in the late 1990s that tried to open up the works in a gallery to a new audience. He maintains that the critics wanted to 'restrict access to the meaning of the works to those who are already knowledgeable'. As one of those critics, Ian Gale, put it: 'Art demands space, light and silence.' O'Neill argues that 'the underlying assumption amongst many museum and art museum staff, rarely spoken, is that museums are for people who are already educated'. From this he concludes: 'Any organisation that is not working to break down barriers to access is actively maintaining them.'[56]

The cultural snobs, whether in the form of critics, audience members or professionals, are old-fashioned exclusivists who clearly wish to keep culture to themselves. They are against such ideas as 'access' and 'outreach'.

Cultural snobs have one overriding emotion: fear. Firstly, fear that more of something makes it worse, and that, as Letts says, 'accessibility is the enemy of art'.[57] This is an odd claim. Is a painting worse when 30,000 people see it as opposed to 300? The experience of seeing it in a crowded gallery is undoubtedly worse than seeing it in an empty room, but how can the art itself be debased by extra pairs of eyes? If schoolchildren are allowed to attend a Shakespeare play, they might not understand all of it, but how does that turn them into 'enemies' of art, or alter the artwork itself?

The cultural snobs' other fear is that their own claim to superior status through cultural knowledge and expertise will be undermined if more people gain access to the same qualities. The cultural absolutism of this group is akin to religious fundamentalism – only the correct historical texts contain the truth, and only the priesthood can interpret them. And, like all true

believers, they feel embattled: 'In any period it is upon a very small minority that the discerning appreciation of art and literature depends...'[58]

Neo-mandarins

The position of the neo-mandarins is different from that of the cultural snobs. These people are 'cultivated' and are cultural enthusiasts who wish to share their enthusiasms with others. They believe it is patronising to assume that anyone is incapable of understanding and enjoying culture and are keen to educate them in 'high' culture. The approach is typified in the Mayor of London's draft cultural strategy published in November 2008:

We should also be ambitious about what young people will enjoy. Too often it is presumed that young people will only like art that they can immediately relate to. Working-class students may be steered towards popular culture like hip-hop, new media and film on the basis that they will find older art forms like opera or ballet irrelevant.[59]

Neo-mandarins have a genuine, and well-placed, attachment to work, particularly of the past, of great quality. They are right to defend it and to want more people to enjoy it. But the problem with the neo-mandarins is that the narrowness of their enthusiasms and their limited points of reference make them, in today's terms, uncultured. Opera and ballet are indeed still 'relevant', but the cultural world is much richer than that. In the words of Raymond Williams: 'We live in an expanding culture, yet we spend much of our energy regretting the fact...'[60]

Like the cultural snobs, the neo-mandarins fear that their right to arbitrate cultural quality is under threat. Neo-mandarins are deeply attached to certain cultural forms and hierarchies; as the *Guardian* blogger Dave Hill says, they regard 'some cultural forms as inherently

superior to others' – opera as better than film or new media for example.[61] With a preference for particular forms of culture, the neo-mandarins are also fearful of 'other' cultures, and are often ignorant about them. Neo-mandarins assert that certain types of culture are universally agreed pinnacles of excellence – they are therefore placed outside politics and society, and outside the terms of debate.

Again, this stance reveals a deep insecurity; a fear of loss of status if their settled cultural understandings are challenged. At stake is not just an aesthetic judgement, but a view of society and the neo-mandarins' place in it. It is not just that 'legitimate culture... is central to the elite, where it oils the wheels of social connections';[62] the stakes are in fact much higher, as the cultural critic Robert Hewison argues:

For the dominant group, culture will become... a source of authority for those who attach themselves to its values. It will be an expression of political authority, the basis of critical authority and an emblem of social aspiration. Control of the resources that support cultural authority will in itself be a form of authority... One way of maintaining consent is to ensure that the culture of the dominant class is not enjoyed exclusively by that class, but that its values permeate the whole of society. Thus the culture of the dominant class becomes identified with the culture of society as a whole.[63]

New cosmopolitans

The new cosmopolitans differ from the neo-mandarins in two ways. First, they have a more eclectic approach. They agree that the neo-mandarins' canon of Western cultural production contains a corpus of work of great quality. They respect, enjoy, and are knowledgeable about Shakespeare, Berlioz, Fra Bartolommeo and the rest, but they want more. They also find cultural quality (by which I mean emotive power, intellectual

stimulation, inventiveness and skill) in popular music, folk art, product design, Youtube uploads – and even in new media and film. The fact that some of these are readily embraced by masses of people and are 'popular culture' does not bother them. Their cosmopolitanism is produced in the dialectic between the local – history and *terroir* – and the global, whether encountered in their locale, on their travels, or through old and new media. In all these places they find pleasure and provocation.

New cosmopolitans would agree with the Mayor of London that '[t]hroughout history, different cities have been important crucibles of culture, where new ideas, thinkers and artists have gathered: Athens in the 5th and 4th centuries BC, Florence in the 15th century, Paris in the early twentieth century.'[64] But they would regard that list as parochial. Cultural sophisticates of 2010 – rather than 1910 – would also refer to the golden ages of Damascus, Isfahan, Benin and Kyoto. They would recognise significant artists and writers working in whatever age, in whatever medium. As the author Tony Sewell says: 'What about jazz? There is so much to learn from Louis Armstrong, John Coltrane and Miles Davis. What about the classical folk culture of the Caribbean?'[65]

To provide children with an education *only* in traditional, received culture does them a disservice. This is where the neo-mandarins fail. Children need to know about Shakespeare and Wordsworth, but they also need to know about hip-hop and manga comics. It is limiting and patronising to think that they need only one or the other. Old and new cultures, familiar and unfamiliar, 'high' and popular, are all part of the mix if you want to understand the world that we live in and to operate with ease as a local or a global citizen.

In terms of class, this matters because an omnivorous approach to culture has now become the mark of cultural capital, and hence an influence on social mobility. As Bennett says: 'Arguably it is less the selection of cultural content (as with legitimate cultural items) and more the orientation towards cultural consumption that delineates class divisions in the UK.'[66]

In the exclusion/inclusion battle, the neo-mandarins are keen to encourage access, which 'essentially suggests that there is something of universal value that everyone is entitled to and should benefit from'. They believe 'that culture should and can be made accessible to all people' and that 'if only we remove all the barriers to culture – be they physical, geographical, economic, or psychological – culture will become accessible and currently under-represented segments of the public will have proportionate representation in the audience'.[67] This is a worthy project, which helps individual social mobility in today's society.

But the new cosmopolitans have a much more radical agenda – and this is the second difference between them and the neo-mandarins – to open up the definition of what constitutes culture, and thereby to make the institutions of culture more socially inclusive by changing what they do, rather than simply changing the way that they do it. It is about making institutions work for all people, not about making more people conform to a mould that focuses on an institutionally defined 'product'.

The new cosmopolitans, then, are in one sense the new cultural middle classes, classified as such by their omnivorous approach to culture. But whereas the old cultural middle class sought to define culture, to control it and to arbitrate it, the new cosmopolitans are comfortable with culture being fluid and eclectic, and emerging from the cut and thrust of contemporary life.

Cultural definition and creation

The major difference between the neo-mandarins and the new cosmopolitans is not that the latter simply add to the list of acceptable artists, artforms or objects; more than that, they see culture as open-ended, dynamic and defined by reference to people rather than cultural 'product'. As the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah stresses:

Cosmopolitanism shouldn't be seen as some exalted attainment: it begins with the simple idea that in the human community, as in national communities, we need to develop habits of coexistence: conversation in its older meaning, of living together, association.[68]

The right side of the diagram in Figure 1 follows a similar trajectory to that on the left side, moving from the definition of culture by a social elite to the creation of culture through mass participation and interaction; in other words from oligarchy to democracy. In terms of the Kulturkampf, or culture war, the big question is this: Is the meaning of culture determined by a small group in society, or is it an open question that everyone contributes to?

Over recent years, the gatekeepers of publicly funded and commercial culture have broadened their – and our – ideas of what counts as culture, and they are also increasingly opening their decisions to influence from outside. In funded culture, more-or-less liberal attitudes have over the years expanded the definition of culture so that, for example, jazz and puppetry are now funded as well as opera and ballet. In commercial culture, market forces influence the professional gatekeepers similarly to expand the range of cultural forms and cultural expression. In both cases, however, the point is that culture is something that is ultimately defined by bureaucracies or corporations.

In homemade culture by contrast, culture is created among people by the interaction of audiences and artists, producers and consumers. And this emergent property of

homemade culture is beginning to have an increasingly powerful effect in publicly funded and commercial culture, encouraging institutions and corporations to work with their publics rather than simply seeing them as consumers of 'product'.

This inexorable shift away from rigid and exclusivist definitions of what constitutes culture, towards a more democratic idea that culture is created together, also alters the position of culture from being something that exists apart from politics and society, to one where it is a force for democratic change.

As Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, Emeritus Professor of Museums Studies, puts it:

Culture is not an autonomous realm of words, things, beliefs, and values. It is not an objective body of facts to be transmitted to passive receivers. It is lived and experienced; it is about producing representations, creating versions, taking a position, and arguing a point of view.[69]

Viewed in this light, how culture gets to be defined, and who has a voice, enters into the territory of social justice. Not only that, but the question of social justice reflects back on the quality of the culture itself. In *The Common Reader*, Virginia Woolf wrote that '[i]t is from the middle class that writers spring, because it is in the middle class only that the practice of writing is... natural and habitual', and she argued that this narrowness led to literary failure, because those writers could not truly represent the other classes in society. She finished her essay by asking the question: 'The art of a truly democratic age will be – what?'[70]

6

Culture and social justice

We have already seen, in section 3, that there is a large gap between the proportion of higher and lower socio-economic groups attending and participating in the arts.

But non-participation is not the same thing as exclusion, and although 'in addition to exclusion from economic, social and political systems, individuals can also be excluded from cultural systems',[71] they can also simply choose not to take part. The question is: how free is that choice?

The historian David Kynaston describes how, after the second world war, government attempts to 'inject a large and improving dose of cultural uplift' foundered because 'the mass of the population was simply not interested... at least 80 per cent of the former wartime audience, now no longer captive, voted negatively with their feet'.[72]

The response of the postwar arts funding system was a rapid retreat from a policy of 'art for all' to one of 'few but roses'. They gave up too easily, as listening to the beneficiaries of wartime concerts shows: 'The Russian ballet. Never seen it before in my life. Loved it...' and 'The one that stands out in my mind is Yehudi Menuhin. It was someone you never dreamt you could hear or see. I just wanted to learn more. We've grown to love music.'[73]

At regular intervals since then, the institutions of publicly funded culture have tried to attract new audiences, but with limited success. Arts Council England data show low levels of overall arts attendance in England: 'Our analysis shows that there are four main

types of arts attender within the English population:

1 Little if anything, 57 per cent of the population
2 Now and then, 27 per cent of the population
3 Enthusiastic, 12 per cent of the population
4 Voracious, four per cent of the population.'[74]

Clearly there are large numbers of people who have no opinion whatever about the arts, and do not see them as relevant to their lives. Should this worry governments and arts organisations? Commenting on the Department for Culture, Media and Sport's strategy to expand the demographic of heritage visitors, the Chairman of the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee said in January 2010:

It is hard to see what useful purpose was achieved by setting targets to increase visits from this or that under-represented group. There was certainly no point in the department's setting targets to widen participation when it did not know how achievable they were (and) had little understanding of the different factors affecting participation...[75]

The report goes on to argue that since 70 per cent of the population visit heritage sites (although a 'visit' is loosely defined and may simply consist of driving through a historic town), the other 30 per cent presumably choose not to. The implication is – what's the problem?

The problem of course is that cultural choices are not being made from an equal starting point, and since cultural capital is a factor in social mobility, that matters. Governments, arts institutions and commercial companies cannot force people to drink at the cultural water trough, but there are things that they can do to influence, assist and enable both a more democratic creation of culture, and a wider access to existing culture.

The UK starts with a number of advantages. First, we already have a strong base, both in terms of infrastructure and talent. To take London as an example, the capital city has more museums, music venues, arts higher education colleges, theatre and concert halls, nightclubs, music performances, World Heritage sites and festivals than New York, Paris, Tokyo or Shanghai, often by a considerable margin.[76]

We very much need to guard against the smug notion that the UK is 'the world's creative hub' – the world does not, and never will have one – but nonetheless we are good at culture. We have a rich cultural heritage, a strong creative sector that accounts for around six per cent of GDP, and a large number of world-class cultural figures. We should be culturally confident without being culturally arrogant.

Second, achieving cultural social justice would not be a costly project. Governments in OECD countries spend very little on culture and creativity. What they do spend is often matched by voluntary contributions from private supporters. Together, the money that governments and sponsors put in is dwarfed by the public's appetite to pay for its enjoyment of culture. Governments get a huge financial return on their investment in culture, and if there was greater social justice in culture, with more people able to increase their cultural capital and exercise their creativity, there is every reason to suppose that this would have a noticeable effect on the UK's national accounts.

7

Finding a better approach

There are many ways that governments and institutions can encourage a direction of travel from oligarchic to democratic culture. Because people live their cultural and social lives well beyond the confines of what governments traditionally see as 'culture', those interventions need to take place across a broad canvas.

In fact such interventions are already happening, but they are not acknowledged as cultural matters. Intellectual property law, for example, is discussed in terms of property rights, commercial success and economic effects, not in terms of personal creativity, pleasure and enjoyment, and rights of access to common culture.

Commercial culture

Commercial culture offers opportunities to creative musicians, artists, writers and the like. It also produces a plural and dynamic culture offering a wide range of choice. At its best it gives us a widely shared common ground of creative excellence in pop music, fashion, broadcasting and beyond. At the margins, governments attempt to place limits on free speech and expression in commercial as well as in other spheres of culture. Governments need to ensure that commercial culture is heterogeneous and available.

The policy prescriptions are straightforward:

- Ensure that public service broadcasting is strong enough to provide a benchmark of quality for the commercial world to live up to and exceed.
- Regulate commercial distribution networks so as to keep plural networks and a lot of choice on radio and TV.
- Protect small-scale bookshops, publishers and music companies from predatory competition.
- Invest in training and education so that the disadvantaged can enter the creative and cultural industries.
- Regulate the copyright protection of commercial archives. As Bill Ivey points out, the ownership of much of our 'common culture' is in private hands, and we need 'rights' in relation to that culture.[77]

Homemade culture

The barriers to entry to homemade culture are similar to those that exist in other parts of the cultural world: having the money, time and confidence to get involved. But there is an additional barrier – gaining access to the means of production and communication, and the skills to use them. Overcoming that problem involves bridging the digital divide, and making changes in the education system.

There is a revolution going on in homemade culture led by the younger generation, and governments should be ensuring that everyone has access to the tools, spaces and places, and education that they need. This will be vital for the economic future of large numbers of people. In the UK, according to the last Labour government's Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, the part of the economy covered by his Department amounts to 10 per cent of GDP – a claim echoed in Labour's pre-election arts manifesto.[78]

The creative industries continue to provide not just more jobs and more prosperity, but more expansion of the human spirit: making music is good work in every sense. Creative ability, like intelligence, is not inherited; nor does it respect class. But there are many factors that inhibit the realisation of the creativity of the disadvantaged, and in some ways, the barriers are getting higher. Some of the structural factors that encouraged the creativity of the poor – such as student grants for poor kids to attend art school, and the early careers of bands being funded by record companies – are starting to disappear either due to market forces or government decisions.

The US economist Richard Florida has charted the growing income gap between what he terms 'the creative classes' and the rest of the workforce.[79] Compared with other OECD countries, the UK has a particularly strong creative sector, accounting for a greater proportion of GDP than its peers.

This presents two equally troubling questions, both of which need detailed research beyond the scope of this essay. Britain is unequal and Britain is creative. To conclude that inequality is therefore creative is a syllogism, but nonetheless the relationship between the two warrants investigation. In a famous scene in the film *The Third Man*, Orson Welles' character Harry Lime says:

You know what the fellow said – in Italy, for thirty years under the Borgias they had warfare, terror, murder and bloodshed, but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci and the Renaissance. In Switzerland, they had brotherly love, they had five hundred years of democracy and peace – and what did that produce? The cuckoo clock.[80]

The second issue is that if the ability to become part of the 'creative class' is restricted by background or class – and getting into employment in the creative industries is often as much about who you know as what you know – and if earnings within the creative sector grow more rapidly than in other sectors, then society will become more, rather than less, unequal.

The exercise of creativity is important economically, and can help individual people out of poverty, but there is another reason why creative expression is important: creative work makes people feel good about themselves. Life satisfaction surveys show that, after three decades of economic growth, we are no more satisfied with our lives than we were in the mid 1970s. The link between increasing GDP and increasing happiness has been well and truly broken. Cultural inclusion and the exercise of creativity provide important routes towards the goal of making life more enjoyable and fulfilling:

The contrast between the material success and social failure of many rich countries is an important signpost. It suggests that, if we are to gain further improvements in the real quality of life, we need to shift attention from material standards and economic growth to ways of improving the psychological and social wellbeing of whole societies.[81]

The economist Richard Layard, in his book *Happiness: Lessons from a new science*, argues that happiness is brought about by status, meaning, fairness, helping others, respect, trust and adaptability.[82] A happy society needs a culture that increases these goods, but as we have seen, our cultural system too often reinforces low status, is patently unfair, and fails to respect individuals.

Publicly funded culture

At the most basic level, governments should shift the focus of cultural policy away from institutional fiefdoms and cultural forms, and focus instead on people. Historically, the cultural policies of all British governments have been concerned not with artists or audiences but overwhelmingly with institutions. Legislation has concerned itself with institutional governance, but not with cultural rights. Cultural funding has similarly been directed towards the maintenance of organisations – either that, or to the achievement of targets where people are treated not as individuals with cultural rights, but as clay to be worked on.

Policy should instead be attempting to produce culturally confident individuals with creative capabilities. Education is crucial. Matthew Arnold was surely right to say that 'education is the road to culture',[83] but not only because education lets people find out about particular types of culture. More importantly, it is also where they learn to develop cultural confidence, and can be encouraged to treat culture and creativity as essential elements in a life well lived. Cultural education has ancillary benefits as well:

Research by James Catterall at UCLA and others has demonstrated that students who are engaged in the arts perform better academically – higher grade point averages and standardized test scores, lower drop-out rates – a finding that cuts across all socio-economic strata.[84]

And yet the education system is still heavily biased against the arts and humanities. We have a new Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, who thinks that dance and music are 'soft' subjects,[85] and a university system that provides an oversupply of science courses and an undersupply of arts courses, and has a research regime heavily weighted against the arts and humanities.

The role of institutions

Cultural institutions and organisations, like governments, need to shift from 'product' to people. Many of them have already put in place measures to attract, educate, and listen to a wide public, but for others it is challenging, and will demand fundamental changes in their practices and attitudes. But there are examples of where very substantial changes have been, and are being, made that encourage more people both to engage with publicly funded culture and to redefine the content of that culture.

First, there is the practice of shaping an arts organisation's programme through a dialogue with people in its locality. Some organisations, like the gallery and cinema Cornerhouse in Manchester, actively work with their actual and potential users to decide what to show and how and when to show it. The London theatre Stratford East has started to talk to the local community about what they want to see in their theatre. Many organisations including the largest and grandest, like the Royal Opera House, the National Theatre and the RSC, are starting to enter into a much richer relationship with the public than simply putting work on stage.

This might sound like an abdication of responsibility and a submission to 'populism' on the part of the arts professional but it is not. As Clore Fellow Claire Antrobus puts it:

There is a widespread, and misplaced, fear among cultural professionals that being user-centred means disregarding quality and the role of expertise. It doesn't – but it does entail championing the art and audience equally.[86]

What is happening in these cases is not culture by plebiscite, with people voting to keep a familiar repertoire, but instead the joint development of a programme of work that gives both the public and the

artists a better way of producing something new. A good example of this happening successfully is Esa-Pekka Salonen's revival of the LA Philharmonic where his 'programming evolved in response to his engagement with the community. This wasn't about pandering; it was, to use his word, dialogue.'[87]

The second change needed in institutional practice flows from evidence that, in the words of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport report *Culture on Demand*, family and social networks are 'the most important drivers of demand',[88] and that a great deal of cultural participation is driven by a desire for social connection. Our cultural choices are heavily influenced by our peers, and we often rely on their judgements and recommendations. The American commentator Diane Ragsdale points out that a New Zealand arts survey in 2006 discovered that the 'low attendance' segment of the population, more than any other group, needed to be encouraged by their own social networks, and she concludes 'in order to facilitate social behaviour, art spaces need to be places where people can commune with each other and with artists'.[89]

Social networks are clearly important, but an understanding of how they work is in its infancy. In their book *Connected: The amazing power of social networks and how they shape our lives*, the authors Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler have discovered that 'different behaviours and moods, much like different viruses, spread according to different patterns'.[90] More work is needed on the detail of how cultural participation is affected by networks.

Another thing that arts organisations could do is to examine their employment practices, especially in relation to internships. They need to ask themselves whether they recruit from all sections of society, or whether there are class barriers in the way of entry and advancement.

8

Conclusion

No culture can live if it attempts to be exclusive.

Mahatma Gandhi

Tim O'Reilly, the editor of *Wired*, says that 'A true web 2.0 application is one that gets better the more people use it'.[91] Culture works in the same way. Culture is not a list of past achievements. It is a dynamic renegotiation and reinterpretation of what we are heirs to, plus the constant creation of new work and new meanings.

In an open and democratic society, it should be possible for everyone, from whatever background or viewpoint, to take part fully in cultural life. If that is not happening, then that society is both selling some of its citizens short, and also operating inefficiently, because it is failing to draw on the talents of all its people. This means that arts policy, *and* policies that influence culture more broadly in the commercial world *and* policies that affect people's capacity to create culture for themselves, are inextricably linked with issues of social justice.

In Britain today, part of the population is culturally and creatively disenfranchised. But social justice and cultural enfranchisement cannot be achieved simply by increasing access to an already-determined 'legitimate' culture. In addition, the culture of the nation – which includes many cultures – must itself be open to contestation and to adaptation from all parts of society.

This is a long-term project, but not a hopeless one. Almost the entire population take part in some form of cultural activity, even if that mostly falls outside the

commonly adopted criteria for measuring participation in the arts and heritage. Pretty much everyone listens, reads, watches, dances and sings. As the novelist and poet Clive James says: 'There is so much to appreciate and it is all available for peanuts.'[92] There even seems to be a wish to join in more with 'legitimate' culture, if only it was more welcoming: 'The arts debate... found a strong sense among many members of the public of being excluded from something they would like to be able to access...'[93]

In a modern democratic society, the ability to understand and engage with the rich variety of cultures that everyone encounters is a precondition to being able to play a full part in contemporary life. A lack of cultural confidence places limits on social mobility. But more importantly, the capacity to express oneself culturally is a mark of freedom, and an exercise of power. If culture is to help break down class divisions and inequalities, rather than reinforce them, then culture itself must be created by everyone and for everyone.

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