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The cultural policy puzzle

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<title>The cultural policy puzzle

<author>Dave O'Brien

<standfirst>Is cultural policy a problem or a solution for social inequality?

Cultural policy presents a puzzle for governments. On the one hand, arts and culture offer a wealth of positive benefits to society. On the other, arts and culture have a close relationship with a range of social inequalities. Elections are not decided on cultural policy platforms, but culture profoundly shapes how people view and experience the world. Therefore, cultural policy can be both the least and the most important area of government. Yet it remains neglected, despite this potential importance. There is a lack of serious strategic thinking in Whitehall; there are government capacity issues, particularly in the context of budget cuts to local authorities; and there is the risk that most interventions will disproportionately benefit people who are already engaged. This paper considers the benefits and problems associated with cultural policy, as well as highlighting the need for an answer to the fundamental question of what government cultural policy is for.

There are now hundreds, if not thousands, of research papers, projects and reports on the positive benefits of culture.¹ Governments and cultural organisations have sought to make the case for support and to understand the impact of investments. We can see useful insights as to the current state of play in recent work by the House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) Select Committee in its inquiry into the social impact of participation in culture and sport. In 2019, it published its report *Changing lives*.² The report is clear that, from the evidence submitted to and the work of the inquiry, “there is no dispute about the positive social impact of participation in culture”. Later sections of the report highlight that “cultural and sporting organisations are having positive impacts on their communities every day of the week”.

<callout> “cultural policy can be both the least and the most important area of government. Yet it remains neglected”

These positive impacts occur across several areas of public policy and social life: crime and criminal justice; education; health and wellbeing; and the regeneration of communities. Regeneration links to several current trends in cultural policymaking, and how practitioners and publics think about the role of culture. For example, Arts Council England is currently consulting on a new 10-year strategy.³ This document highlights the importance of arts organisations and activities to places across England. It also gives prominence to the Creative People and Places programme, which is a set of projects taking place in areas with comparatively lower levels of arts provision and engagement.

The evidence submitted to the DCMS Select Committee’s inquiry gives similar prominence to the impact of arts and culture on place. Hull’s status as UK City of Culture 2017 is seen as particularly important. This is alongside other cities, such as Sunderland, which submitted bids for the 2021 title. For the organisations submitting evidence to the inquiry, culture was

¹ Crossick G and Kaszynska P (2017) *Understanding the value of arts & culture: The AHRC Cultural Value Project*, Arts & Humanities Research Council. <https://ahrc.ukri.org/documents/publications/cultural-value-project-final-report/>

² House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee (2019) *Changing lives: The social impact of participation in culture and sport*, parliament.uk. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcmds/734/734.pdf>

³ Arts Council England (2019) *Draft strategy 2020–30*, Arts Council England. <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/publication/draft-strategy-2020-30>

a powerful force for remaking localities. Indeed, there is a sense of consensus about the power of culture in the evidence submissions. This consensus is irrespective of whether the submissions are discussing regeneration and social transformation, or any of the other areas of culture's role in public policy.

Both the DCMS Select Committee's report and Arts Council England's consultation document also point to some of the issues facing cultural policy. Both documents are informed by the relationship between social inequalities and culture. This relationship can be understood by thinking about two sets of problems for cultural policy: inequalities that are within the cultural sector; and the impact of culture on social inequalities more generally.

In terms of inequalities within the cultural sector, we can start with the workforce. Occupations in the creative industries are marked by significant absences of working-class origin people, black and minority ethnic people and, in some occupations, women.⁴ In specific occupations, according to recent research from The Sutton Trust and the Social Mobility Commission, the highest-profile successful people in occupations such as acting come from some of the most privileged sections of society.⁵

<callout> “two sets of problems for cultural policy: inequalities that are within the cultural sector; and the impact of culture on social inequalities more generally”

Engagement with arts and culture is also highly unequal. A useful example is from England.⁶ Analysis of data from the government's Taking Part survey suggests that *not* attending any formal cultural activity is the norm for over a fifth of the population. Genres including classical music, contemporary dance and opera are niche activities. They attract attendance from only a very small minority of the English population.⁷ This is in contrast to the social status and funding they are given. Changes driven by digital participation, the digitisation of collections or new approaches to social media have not improved these inequalities.⁸ Commenting on these patterns does not mean that we should ignore issues facing these genres and art forms. They are supported by highly committed staff, who are often overworked and underpaid. It can be a struggle for organisations to maintain an offer of high-quality work for a range of individuals and communities. However, it is important to know that, even despite the best efforts of organisations and staff, Taking Part data indicates important inequalities in cultural consumption.

The demographics of the workforce and of the audience are related to questions of what is, and what is not, characterised as legitimate culture and afforded state support.⁹ It is here that patterns of tastes shift from individuals' likes and dislikes of art forms, to broader social

⁴ O'Brien D, Laurison D, Miles A and Friedman S (2016) 'Are the creative industries meritocratic? An analysis of the 2014 British Labour Force Survey', *Cultural Trends* 25(2): 116–131. DOI:10.1080/09548963.2016.1170943

⁵ The Sutton Trust (2019) *Elitist Britain 2019*, The Sutton Trust. <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Elitist-Britain-2019-Summary-Report.pdf>

⁶ Hanquinet L, O'Brien D and Taylor M (2019) 'The coming crisis of cultural engagement? Measurement, methods, and the nuances of niche activities', *Cultural Trends* 28(2–3): 198–219. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09548963.2019.1617941>

⁷ Brook O, O'Brien D and Taylor M (2018) *Panic! Social class, taste and inequalities in the creative industries*, Create London. <http://createlondon.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Panic-Social-Class-Taste-and-Inequalities-in-the-Creative-Industries1.pdf>

⁸ Mihelj S, Leguina A and Downey J (2019) 'Culture is digital: cultural participation, diversity and the digital divide', *New Media & Society* 21(7): 1465–1485. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818822816>

⁹ Saha A (2017) 'The politics of race in cultural distribution: addressing inequalities in British Asian theatre', *Cultural Sociology* 11(3): 302–317. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975517708899>

inequalities. This is not just a question of whether cultural institutions and activities would disappear without government investment. Rather, it is a question of how specific cultural activity is given the social status that comes with funding and support.

The social status of a cultural form, and the investment and support that might be associated with that status, are closely connected to inequalities in cultural representations.¹⁰ A whole range of cultural and media studies research has made the case that how specific areas of cultural life are funded – the political economy of cultural production¹¹ – has consequences for the way individuals and communities are represented. In television, for example, the need for programmes to be produced at low costs and the need to attract audiences in a crowded and competitive media market are some of the factors shaping the commissioning of reality television. This genre is very popular, but it has been criticised for its sensationalist, distorted and unfair representation of working-class communities.¹²

Commissioning decisions return our focus to inequalities within the cultural workforce. Recent work on social mobility has highlighted commissioning as particularly socially exclusive.¹³ It welcomes those with specific educational backgrounds, while being hostile to those who do not know the ‘studied informality’ and the rules of the (commissioning) game. The closed nature of who makes decisions about commissioning culture draws attention to the second problem for cultural policy. This is how arts and culture are linked to a range of inequalities beyond questions of who works in cultural occupations or who attends cultural activities. For example, academic research has suggested that cultural knowledge, having the ‘right’ sort of tastes, can pay off when it comes to accessing higher education¹⁴ and professional employment. This aspect of ‘hiring as cultural matching’¹⁵ is one part of explaining a lack of social mobility into professional occupations.

These two problems are set against the backdrop of a fragmented system. Cultural policy is a devolved responsibility, both in terms of the different national governments within the UK, and in terms of the role of local authorities. The DCMS Select Committee report highlighted the lack of ‘joined-up’ working across Whitehall, meaning that the impact of culture on criminal justice, education, urban regeneration and health has not been fully embraced by government.¹⁶

<callout> “the impact of culture on criminal justice, education, urban regeneration and health has not been fully embraced by government”

¹⁰ Nwonka C J and Malik S (2018) ‘Cultural discourses and practices of institutionalised diversity in the UK film sector: “just get something black made”’, *The Sociological Review* 66(6): 1111–1127.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026118774183>; O’Brien D, Allen K, Friedman S and Saha A (2017) ‘Producing and consuming inequality: a cultural sociology of the cultural industries’, *Cultural Sociology* 11(3): 271–282.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975517712465>

¹¹ De Benedictis S, Allen K and Jensen T (2017) ‘Portraying poverty: the economics and ethics of factual welfare television’, *Cultural Sociology* 11(3): 337–358. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975517712132>

¹² Allen K, Tyler I and De Benedictis S (2014) ‘Thinking with “White Dee”: the gender politics of “austerity porn”’, *Sociological Research Online*, 19(3): 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.3439>

¹³ Friedman S and Laurison D (2019) *The class ceiling*, Policy Press

¹⁴ Zimdars A, Sullivan A and Heath A (2009) ‘Elite higher education admissions in the arts and sciences: is cultural capital the key?’, *Sociology* 43(4): 648–666. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038509105413>

¹⁵ Rivera L A (2012) ‘Hiring as cultural matching: the case of elite professional service firms’, *American Sociological Review* 77(6): 999–1022. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122412463213>

¹⁶ House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee (2019) *Changing lives: The social impact of participation in culture and sport*, parliament.uk.

<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcmds/734/734.pdf>

Cultural policy, therefore, offers a strategic dilemma for public policy. There are potentially great gains, as demonstrated by some of the current evidence base for the impact of culture across several policy areas¹⁷. At the same time, many of these gains may end up accruing to those sections of society that are most privileged, further exacerbating social inequalities and social divisions despite the very best intentions of policymakers and practitioners. What is most worrying is the idea that, in terms of publicly funded arts and culture, the system might be working! We have a socially closed set of cultural producers serving a similarly closed set of cultural consumers. This closed system is surely not what policy makers want. Notwithstanding any intentions for change, this closed loop is supported by policy interventions that, over the lifespan of the DCMS, has done little to change or challenge the demographics of either group.

One way of illustrating this problem is by thinking about programmes designed to attract new visitors and change audience demographics by removing entry costs. Free entry into national museums has been a longstanding commitment by Labour, Coalition and Conservative administrations. However, it has not had a transformative impact on who goes to museums. Attendance is driven by a sense of ownership, feeling welcomed, connected, and represented by a museum, rather than solely based on entry costs.¹⁸ Based on Taking Part data, making entry free for particular national museums does not seem to have addressed the more fundamental questions of who is included and who is excluded by institutions.

This is not an argument to remove free entry to museums. There are many other benefits from this policy, not least of which is funding for vital national institutions during almost 10 years of funding cuts. The example shows two things. First, that more funding can potentially miss the audience it is supposed to target. Second, that much more detailed and strategic thinking is needed to change the relationship between cultural organisations and sections of the public. Most importantly, this change must start by asking why organisations are failing to attract particular individuals and communities, rather than seeing those individuals and communities as in deficit if they do not attend.¹⁹

<callout> “much more detailed and strategic thinking is needed to change the relationship between cultural organisations and sections of the public”

Often, discussions of policy are only focussed on what local or national governments can do. In the case of cultural policy, more must be demanded from cultural organisations, practitioners and, crucially, audiences. This may seem unfair given the low pay, precarity and poor working conditions that characterise many parts of the cultural sector. However, it is clear that many parts of the cultural sector in the UK see things like low pay and poor working conditions as the norm.²⁰ Moreover, pay and working conditions are linked to the barriers that stop women, black and minority ethnic people, disabled people and working-class origin people getting into and getting on in cultural occupations. Giving more funding and investment may help address issues of pay, but it is unlikely that they will change the

¹⁷ Crossick G and Kaszynska P (2017) *Understanding the value of arts & culture: The AHRC Cultural Value Project*, Arts & Humanities Research Council. <https://ahrc.ukri.org/documents/publications/cultural-value-project-final-report/>

¹⁸ Dawson E (2019) *Equity, exclusion and everyday science learning: The experiences of minoritised groups*, Routledge

¹⁹ Miles A and Sullivan A (2012) ‘Understanding participation in culture and sport: mixing methods, reordering knowledges’, *Cultural Trends* 21(4): 311–324. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09548963.2012.726795>

²⁰ Percival N and Hesmondhalgh D (2014) ‘Unpaid work in the UK television and film industries: resistance and changing attitudes’, *European Journal of Communication* 29(2): 188–203

deep-rooted and entrenched ideas about what sorts of individuals should be producers, directors and commissioners,²¹ along with what sorts of stories should be told. The cultural sector has to take responsibility for its role in the continued exclusions of those who do not replicate the white, middle-class standard²² that dominates the cultural sector in the UK. Sadly, all of the signs suggest that this will be a slow process. Pressure can come from policy, in terms of funding incentives and enforcement. It must also come from the consumer. The audience, whether as an attender, listener, reader or watcher, must demand change, and be more active as customers as well as campaigners, in rejecting arts and culture that depend on exploitation and exclusion.

<callout> “The cultural sector has to take responsibility for its role in the continued exclusions of those who do not replicate the white, middle-class standard that dominates the cultural sector”

Alongside the need for practitioners and audiences to demand change sits the question of where cultural policy is focussed. Currently much attention is given to the DCMS and the national-level arts policy organisations Creative Scotland and the Arts Councils of England, Wales and Northern Ireland. However, other areas of government can be much more influential in addressing the relationship between culture and inequality.

It is clear that at local authority level, since 2010, there has been a drastic and dramatic collapse of the capacity to deliver arts and cultural services.²³ To use the English example, some areas have continued funding at reduced levels, but none has managed to fully protect cultural services from the reduced funding settlement for the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. This example is important as it shows how just giving more funds to the arts, via national arts councils alone, will not be enough to deal with the lost potential of cultural policy, nor the social inequalities associated with culture. The target of funding should be much closer to individuals and communities, via the democratic control of local councils.

Capacity building to deliver sustainable local cultural services – whether libraries, theatres or arts and health programmes – might not seem to be a radical first step for cultural policy. Similarly, placing a focus on schools and education policy may seem a modest approach. However, access to arts and culture in the curriculum is vitally important²⁴ in the context of the influence of fee-paying schools on who works in top arts jobs. At the same time, equal access to arts and culture in schools will have an impact on audiences later in life. This is not

²¹ Wreyford N (2018) *Gender inequality in screenwriting work*, Palgrave; Saha A (2018) *Race and the cultural industries*, Polity Press; Ramdarshan Bold M (2019) *Inclusive young adult fiction: Authors of colour in the United Kingdom*, Palgrave Macmillan

²² Friedman S and O'Brien D (2017) 'Resistance and resignation: responses to typecasting in British acting', *Cultural Sociology* 11(3): 359–376. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975517710156>

²³ Harvey A (2016) *Funding arts and culture in a time of austerity*, New Local Government Network. <http://www.nlgn.org.uk/public/wp-content/uploads/Funding-Arts-and-Culture.pdf>; Romer C (2018) 'Local authority culture budgets down £48m in 5 years', *Arts Professional*, 27 July 2018. <https://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/news/local-authority-culture-budgets-down-ps48m-5-years>

²⁴ Cultural Learning Alliance (2018) *Patterns in GCSE and A Level entries 2010 to 2018*, Cultural Learning Alliance. <https://culturallearningalliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Patterns-in-GCSE-entries-2010-to-2018-England-only.pdf>; Cultural Learning Alliance (2018) *Increasing decline in the hours of arts teaching and number of arts teachers in England's secondary schools*, Cultural Learning Alliance. <https://culturallearningalliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Arts-teaching-hours-and-workforce-2018.pdf>; APPG for Music Education, the Incorporated Society of Musicians and the University of Sussex (2019) *Music education: State of the nation*, Incorporated Society of Musicians. <https://www.ism.org/images/images/FINAL-State-of-the-Nation-Music-Education-for-email-or-web-2.pdf>

to say that everyone will become an avid opera, classical music or museum fan. Rather, cultural tastes and choices will at least be influenced by parity of access to culture in education.

Many, many more examples could be given. Indeed, this discussion has only touched on the vast range of inequalities that could be considered when thinking about culture. At the centre of every possible future for cultural policy and every policy recommendation is the need to ask: What is cultural policy for? The current administration's efforts, in the form of *The culture white paper*²⁵ and the *Creative industries sector deal*,²⁶ contain a range of policy interventions, but do not answer this core question.

Against the backdrop of a politically and culturally polarised electorate²⁷ and an unequal society, asking this question might seem a thankless task. Yet unless the question is addressed, we will continue to see a comparatively closed publicly supported cultural sector, serving a comparatively closed audience. There are ways to solve this problem. They all begin by having a well-thought-out vision for the role of arts and culture in society, coupled with an honest assessment of what the data tells us about culture and inequality. Otherwise we will continue to have the puzzle of cultural policy – despite the efforts and best intentions of policy, practice and the public – failing to drive change.

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²⁵ Department for Culture, Media and Sport (2016) *The culture white paper*, DCMS.
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/culture-white-paper>

²⁶ HM Government (2018) *Industrial strategy: Creative industries sector deal*, GOV.UK.
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/creative-industries-sector-deal>

²⁷ Jennings W and Stoker G (2016) 'The bifurcation of politics: two Englands', *Political Quarterly* 87(3): 372–382. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.12228>