

The great and the good or high art on hard times

Oliver Bennett's Cultural Policy

Oliver Bennett: British cultural policies, 1970-1990 (Boekmancahier 9, september 1991)

Justin O'Connor and Derek Wynne Oliver Bennett's paper on British Cultural Policies presents a bleak world of crisis and uncertainty from which he can see no immediate relief. It is a despondency by no means rare within British 'arts and culture' elites. Beginning with an account of the ambiguities of the British use of the word culture he then goes on to ignore the problems that this recognition throws up. An account that seems to open up the debate on cultural policy very rapidly moves to shut it down within its traditional, conservative world.

Bennett gives us three uses of the term, all more or less overlapping. First, 'a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development' – hence the adjective cultured. Second, 'the word is used to describe a whole way of life – whether of a period, a people or a group' – from which latterly we have youth culture, gay culture, sub-culture etc. Third, 'it refers to the products of intellectual and particularly artistic activity'. Bennett points to the closeness of this to the first definition of culture as process – and, he adds, given the fact that in traditional British cultural criticism culture was 'presented as a humanising alternative to the mechanistic and aggressively individualistic values of industrial civilisation', then the 'linguistic superstructure' built upon the third definition – cultural industries, cultural products, cultural consumption, cultural

statistics, cultural professions etc. – 'can to some appear as a paradoxical juxtaposition'. What then is a cultural policy? If culture is process then cultural policy will have a broad application, 'relating to personal development, formal and informal education, and aesthetic sensitivity'. The list of institutions involved in such an intervention in culture is, as you would expect, very long. In the second case 'it is hard to conceive of a whole way of life being planned'; using Eliot he argues that cultural policy in this sense is rather meaningless – 'Culture', he argues, 'can never be wholly conscious – there is always more to it than we are conscious of; it cannot be planned because it is also the unconscious background of all our planning.' That Bennett accepts such a massively loaded proposition, from an author so fundamental to the conservative thought

structure that permeates British social and political, as well as cultural life is astonishing. It becomes less so as we read on.

The third definition – culture as product – appears the most manageable and straightforward: 'It can be seen to relate to policies designed for the production of art, and for the presentation of art to audiences.' Immediately then, culture as product becomes Art. Cultural policy is then split in two; those policies developed by organisations in the public sector and those developed in the private sector. This latter is broken down further into 'policies developed by small organisations, such as private galleries and commercial theatre' and 'the so-called cultural industries of film, video, television, publishing, broadcasting and recording'. Why this subdivision? On what criteria? Is it because the former, though private, still deal in 'high art' forms whereas the latter are permeated by the logic of electronic reproduction? Bennett, having opened up some of the most crucial issues in contemporary cultural debate, immediately shuts them down into a traditional concern with the arts – to which he has now reduced culture – and their difficult relationship to the commercial world.' Can an organisation be said to have a cultural policy, just because it produces or sells cultural artifacts? Can a policy be cultural when the profit motive is dominant? When does a policy become cultural? 'The old tensions between art and industry are all too clear'. Nowhere more than in this series of precisely the wrong questions does Bennett reveal his deep conservatism and his inability to even recognise how profoundly wrapped up he is in the mentality of Leavisite cultural studies.

We shall leave Bennett's pedestrian account of the structure of British funding for the arts. The conclusion is that there are a number of

competing agencies and that something is being done in the way of clearer lines of responsibility. The 'future structure is still unclear' he says, as is 'whether these changes will be welcomed by the arts producing organisations'. This is wholly inadequate. While the new structure may have been unclear in its details, everybody knew that nothing fundamental would be changed. A few tiers abolished or merged, a few institutions pushed over to other funding organisations. This has now happened and it would be too boring to provide further details. The fundamental presumptions of the national funding structure have been left in place. Bennett reveals his complicity with the government he criticises in seeing the problem as one of management and lines of responsibility; the government want to make these more efficient (what does this mean?). Bennett reluctantly agrees, although, efficiency being related to the despised commercial world, he longs nostalgically for the old 'informal', 'half-baked' world of bumbling administrators, where the 'enterprising arts administrator' in the absence of a 'single, controlling bureaucracy', can, 'if one door closes ... find others that will open'. He totally ignores the debates on integrated cultural strategies that have been developed in conjunction with local authorities throughout the 1980s, where policies within tourism, urban regeneration, economic development, environment, education and the arts have been increasingly brought together in a new style of cultural policy. This is ignored because Bennett is concerned with one question – public funding for the 'arts'.

This is the question tackled in the concluding section. The 1980s saw a shift in cultural policy. The 1970s had seen an extension and minor radicalisation of the post-1945 notion of bringing arts to the masses. In the '70s this was

‘stripped of its missionary overtones’ and presented in terms of the democratisation of culture, bringing its rightful cultural heritage to the socio-economically disenfranchised masses. Bennett seems fully aware of the elitism built into this notion, even using Raymond Williams’ description of this Fabian notion of culture as ‘the ideal of leading the unenlightened to the particular kind of light which the leaders find satisfactory for themselves’. But he then goes on to completely ignore this – the debates showed ‘a genuine concern’ with the ‘relations between art and society’ but in the 1980s such concerns ‘gradually diminished in the face of more pressing issues’. In fact, as we shall see, exactly the opposite happened.

For Bennett the problem was that the government, by squeezing funding for the arts inaugurated the ‘policies of survival’. The government, with the intention of breaking the ‘welfare state mentality’ forced the arts into the market place. Ticket prices went up; arts administrators were to see themselves as ‘business executives’; the arts were to be described as economic commodity and their worth measured in terms of economic impact; business sponsorship encouraged. This has meant a lack of risk-taking, a restriction of programming due to expense, and the general difficulties of being strapped for cash. The arts in Britain are being forced into the sponsorship market – but have no tradition of such as in the USA; they are trapped between the bureaucracy of the European state model and the private sphere of the US model – getting the benefits of neither. Then follows the most amazing piece of argumentation. We are reminded again of the extremely limited audiences for the arts produced by the public sector (around 5-10% of the population) and of the overwhelming dominance of the cultural industries in the

production and distribution of cultural goods (is this art? we are not told): ‘Arts organisations in Britain thus find themselves in a double bind; they are inadequately supported by an inadequate system, and are therefore thrown back on to the marketplace where they encounter increasingly fierce competition from the cultural industries.’

This quotation can stand as representative of the woolly and self-serving argumentation that now currently permeates the lower ranks of the national funding organisations – grumbling that abruptly falls quiet as the slick new Thatcherite boss walks into the room. At the beginning of the paper cultural industries were an extension of the third definition of culture as product, now they are a direct threat. They (presumably making up the cultural provision of 95% of the population) exist in the marketplace on to which the arts are now ‘thrown’. It is an ugly place which one can overcome only with dedication and difficulty, like aristocrats forced to turn their stately homes over to tourists. This would be more palatable if it were not argued with such a lack of purpose – even a reactionary one: ‘The old idea of the democratisation of culture, with its associated uncertainties, no longer holds. Unless it can be replaced by a persuasive alternative, arts policy in Britain is unlikely to change (...) and British arts organisations can expect another very uneasy decade.’

The lack of analysis, the lack of ideal, the lack of spine in this conclusion so well represents the complete abdication of the great and the good before government bullying – indeed in its willingness to relinquish its ideals, a secret complicity. Why has the ideal of the ‘democratisation of culture’ gone? Did the criticisms of its elitism evaporate? Of course not. And what is a ‘persuasive alternative’? Does

he not believe in ‘democratisation’ or is it that nobody else does? Would he be persuaded by an alternative, and if so do we have any idea what it might be? And if it emerged how would we define culture in the absence of a democratising ideal? Bennett has no answers for us.

The problem lies in his original definitions: culture as process and culture as a whole way of life. How do these differ? For Eliot and other conservatives a whole way of life was used precisely to attack the notion of rational change – it goes straight back to Burke and his organic society. As with the notion of heritage, the description of a whole way of life immediately invokes danger and threat, protection against the ravages of modernity or industrial society. Culture is certainly a whole way of life but it is at the same time a ‘process of spiritual, intellectual and aesthetic development’ – if we conceive these in their widest possible sense. There was no need for Bennett to associate this latter notion with Matthew Arnold and the Romantics who opposed culture to the commercial and industrial world. That they did this was certainly the case, but this was one conservative strand and very much related to the notion of a whole way of life somehow beyond rational planning, therefore beyond rational description, therefore beyond criticism – not Rights of Man but Rights of Englishmen, as Burke said, defending our archaic constitution.

If cultural policy is to be conceived of in terms of culture as process, Bennett argued at the beginning, then a wide range of agencies are involved – ‘government, local authorities, schools, colleges, university, the media, arts organisations, charities, voluntary organisations, political parties, trades unions, professional societies, the church, the family

and a great deal of commercial enterprise. All these are instruments of cultural policy.’ And this is the last we hear of it. Presumably the list is so big Bennett does not even have to state that this is unfeasible, yet this is precisely what contemporary cultural policy has been doing in the 1980s. As we have said above, local authorities are increasingly seeing cultural policy as involving precisely such a wide range of agencies. The difficult question of coordinating these in a coherent and efficient manner is not a ‘management problem’ – which is what it becomes if the only problem is the allocation of funds to deserving artists – but one of defining what we want a cultural policy or policies to achieve; what do we want to do and for whom? Only by the process of negotiation, arguments, threats, demands, by great and petty politics alike, do we come to a working strategy. Management strategies are, of course, built into this debate, but they are subordinate to it.

If cultural policy does involve this wide range of agencies then it must begin with existing patterns of cultural production, consumption and distribution. The task cannot be to ask how can ‘art’ be injected into or protected from this world of secondary and superficial culture. This is why the cultural industries are crucial to any discussion of cultural policy. As Bennett repeatedly points out publicly funded cultural products reach only a small minority of the population; but the cultural industries are not just about ‘the market’, a commercial world about to submerge ‘the arts’, they are an intrinsic part of culture as process, of people’s everyday life. The market is certainly a central part of this world, but is not its defining characteristic. Rather, both commodified and non-commodified cultural productions intertwine in the non-subsidised sector – producing a complex picture of market,

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institutional and personal relations that make up the cultural activities of the vast majority of the population. The market itself is an abstract concept, it depends on how it is to be used. The 'power of the market' is a disguise for those playing within its rules. The fact that the cultural industries are involved in the making of profit does not mean that their claim to be cultural is somehow made questionable. In continuing the opposition of art and market Bennett ignores the question of which market. The regulation, manipulation and transformation of markets by public and private agencies is now orthodox economics everywhere in Europe outside the British Conservative Party.

As such we need to ask the opposite sort of questions to Bennett; not how the arts can be protected against the market by public funding, but how cultural production and cultural consumption can be enhanced and extended against the restrictive tendencies of the market. This is immediately a debate about values – about (to quote one recent commentator) 'diversity, innovation, social pleasure, participation, the environment and economic generation'.¹ The debate should be about these values and how (if we want to) we should achieve them, not simply about how to protect certain forms of artistic production.

This brings us on to a further point, about how, despite the first two definitions of culture, we are left only with culture as product, and artistic product at that. What Bennett provides is a list (which would surprise almost nobody) of new technologies (videos, CD's etc.) and practices (watching TV, not reading books) that have created a home based 'personal cultural centre'. Whether this is good or bad we are not explicitly told – just that if arts are to compete on the market this is the competition. Rather

than asking about the constraints and possibilities of this pattern of consumption it is assumed to be homogeneous, straightforward, easy. Bennett's condescension can be detected in his description: 'It's safe, it's comfortable, it's convenient, and it's cheap'. Significantly it is 'programmed' by the cultural industries, a word invoking both automated production and mass manipulation. Any cultural policy has to look at what people actually do, at what network of practises and institutions and needs and desires make up popular culture(s). This is the real basis for the debate on marketing. Bennett seems to see it as a threat, an imposition from the commercial world, forcing 'three year plans, time management, and bigger and better markets' on the arts. That these are necessary and can enhance provision – finding out what people want and need, how best to deliver, these are crucial to any democratic cultural policy. Artistic disdain for the audience, the emphasis on production over consumption, the opposition of creativity to planning – all this abandons the debate to the free-marketeters, apart from the elitism inherent in 'bigger and better markets'. Is not the debate over a democratic culture centred on the profound difficulties of what a 'bigger and better market' can mean?

Cultural policy has always been tied into economic debates, it is just that now the economics is undermining the colonisation of arts funding by middle class elites. Cultural policy does not find its sole justification in its economic benefits, however persuasive such arguments can be², but economics must be a part of it. Similarly, the public funding of the 'high arts' will be part of any such policy, but it can no longer be the central concern, to which all else is sacrificed. Cultural policy must be tied to popular cultural activities and the needs and pleasures of everyday life. This is not to say that cultural policy is about everything that

anybody does. A working definition of what constitutes a cultural product is now part of the debate. Equally so is the question of quality and value; that 'anything goes' is both philosophically indefensible and practically useless, as somebody at some time has to decide what gets funded and what doesn't, what gets public authority attention or economic priority and what doesn't. But this debate has to be located outside traditional forms of 'high art' validation. How this is to be done, how tentative approaches and ad hoc practises have begun to seek some workable answer should have been the real subject of Oliver Bennett's paper. Non-commodified services are intertwined with those that are commodified to produce in the non subsidised sector arts organisations funded cultural productions – a complex picture of market, institutional and personal relations that make up the cultural activities of the vast majority of the population.

Notes

1. J. Lewis. *Art, culture and enterprise: the politics of art and the cultural industries*. London: Routledge, 1990.
2. See the above. Also: Mulgan and Walpole. *Saturday night or Sunday morning*. London, Commedia 1986. Bennett's restriction of this aspect of the debate to Myerscough fails to reflect the scope and sophistication of the debates taking place in academic, consultancy and local authority circles on this aspect of the question. See also: Wynne, O'Connor et al. *The culture industry*. Swindon: Gower, Spring 1992.

A respons from Oliver Bennett

Oliver Bennett O'Connor and Wynne's arguments proceed with McCarthyite logic: guilt by association. So, a concern for art in Thatcher's Britain (which it still is) becomes paid up membership of an 'art and culture elite'. We are never told what these elites are, but we are presumably intended to conclude that they are not the ones to which O'Connor and Wynne belong. Reference to a Conservative thinker (T.S. Eliot) becomes proof of intellectual contamination. I prefer J.S. Mill: 'If a Conservative philosophy were an absurdity, it is well calculated to drive out a hundred absurdities worse than itself.' Incidentally, it was Eliot who first criticised 'the Fabian tone in culture'.

However, if we are looking for precision or fine distinctions, we shall be disappointed. Instead, we find knee-jerk reactions and empty formulas, wrapped up in a cloak of indignant self-righteousness. Once this is stripped away, we see that the conclusions are in fact strikingly trite. Firstly: 'Cultural policy must be tied to popular cultural activities and the needs and pleasures of everyday life.' Which, how and by whom, we are not told. And then: 'A working definition of what constitutes a cultural product is now part of the debate.' When was it *not* part of the debate?

It's difficult to take these conclusions seriously, but once we penetrate the jargon, we encounter a more disturbing level of ignorance and naivety. The subsidised arts (later referred to as 'non-commodified cultural productions') are first of all *en bloc* contemptuously dismissed as a 'traditional, conservative world'. This is such a ridiculous proposition that one can only

assume that O'Connor and Wynne are ignorant of the diversity of work that depends for its existence on some form of public subsidy: libraries, museums, galleries, arts centres, video workshops, theatres, community art projects, festivals, film theatres, etc. etc. In an extraordinary piece of reductionism, all this gets dismissed as 'high art'.

With the subsidised sector thus misrepresented, O'Connor and Wynne then proceed to ignore the current financial crisis (which is there for anyone to see), and to suppress discussion of real hardship with accusations of 'self-serving argumentation'. This is rather like Margaret Thatcher telling the victims of her policies to 'stop whingeing': it is no substitute for addressing the problems.

However, O'Connor and Wynne are not interested in real problems, but prefer instead

to inhabit a fantasy world of 'integrated cultural strategies'. There is not a word about the pressing need for an increased Government commitment to the cultural sector, which, by European standards, is derisory. This is particularly ironic, because the key agents of the strategies they propose, the Local Authorities, are precisely those bodies which have been hit hardest by the Conservative Government's determination to 'roll back the frontiers of the State'. O'Connor and Wynne even seem to forget that the Local Authority which did most to develop the kind of policies they advocate – the Greater London Council – was simply abolished. I don't know of anyone in the cultural sector (except perhaps John Myerscough) who shares their idiosyncratic view of the 1980s as a brave new world of exciting opportunities.

But O'Connor and Wynne aren't really interested in the subsidised sector, and they evidently know very little about it. For them, the fact that it needs to be subsidised means that it isn't popular; and if it isn't popular, it isn't significant. Thus, they tell us, 'it can no longer be the central concern'. This crude equation of value with market success not only ignores historical evidence, but more seriously, shirks any real critical engagement with the difficult questions of quality. 'Quality and value' is 'part of the debate', they assure us, and 'somebody at sometime has to decide' – but clearly not O'Connor or Wynne.

Nowhere is this abdication of critical responsibility clearer than in their discussion of cultural industries. With an astonishing naivety, corporate marketing gets characterised as: 'Finding out what people want and need, and how best to deliver'. And, we are assured, 'the fact that the cultural industries are involved in the making of profit does not mean that their

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claim to be cultural is somehow made questionable'. Quite so. But what kind of culture? From another perspective, it can look like a disturbing concentration of power in too few hands, a narrowing of choice, deepening sexist and racist prejudices, and the glorification of violence. Within developing countries, it can seem like cultural imperialism.

In their uncritical enthusiasm for popular culture, O'Connor and Wynne ignore all this. They seem quite unaware of the continuing challenges to postmodernism's political and social collusions, with which they are so deeply implicated. There is, to be sure, more waffle about the 'regulation, manipulation and transformation of markets', but how this is to be done, in what way and by whom, we are never told. Half an hour with Rupert Murdoch would teach them a great deal.

O'Connor and Wynne raise important issues in their paper – as I attempted to do in mine. But in their crude caricatures, in their ignorance of practical realities, and in their absurd simplifications, they merely degrade the level of the debate. It deserves more. The problems are extremely complex: there are more questions than answers. But this, I suspect, is the real difficulty. Complexity, contradiction, uncertainty – these are anathema to fundamentalists.

Bibliografische gegevens

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