

Cultural Policy Beyond Aesthetics

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I want to start with some general remarks that will provide a context for the two readings I chose for the seminar as well as explaining why I chose those readings; and then move on to offer some more specific remarks related to the concerns of each of those readings.

Let me kick off the general remarks with a few words on my title – which, although it might seem a provocation, is not really intended as such; rather, I envisaged it more as a response to how I felt provoked by the theme for your spring workshop programme – *Measuring Tastes and Values* – or, more accurately, by the set of oppositions informing the way that theme was elaborated. The reason given for being concerned with measuring tastes and values was the need for cultural policies to be guided by data revealing how people value high-cultural goods and experiences: museum going, reading poetry, going to the ballet or lectures on Shakespeare or Toni Morrison. No problems so far, but then the description goes on to say that while the social sciences have developed useful means for measuring consumer preferences for commodities and how people make trade-offs between competing goods, it's doubtful whether such tools could be used to measure high-cultural tastes and experiences. And then:

‘Indeed , the very definition of “culture” – as that which resists the cash nexus and economic thinking – seems to many to make any such effort contradictory at best.’

Now my problem, to be clear, is not with the view that cultural policies are assisted by our ability to convert different cultural values and aesthetic tastes and preferences into quantifiable forms in order to provide some comparative guidelines for governing the allocation of public resources between different 'taste communities'. To the contrary, this seems to me to be indispensable if the agendas of cultural democracy are to be taken seriously. And I also think that – for all of its imperfections and difficulties – the work of Pierre Bourdieu has given us a means of setting about this task that avoids the polarity of placing social science methods on the one side of a divide and aesthetic values and experience. For Bourdieu's great innovation in *Distinction* was surely to pluralise and relativise aesthetic values in a way that made it possible for those values associated with high-cultural tastes to be converted into numerical form through the application of survey techniques in the same way and on a par with other principles of taste. Of course, there are difficulties with the particularities of Bourdieu's position, especially its tendency to interpret aesthetic dispositions in terms of where they fall in between the polar extremes of a high culture aesthetic based on the principles of disinterestedness and a-corporeality and a popular aesthetic grounded in a corporeally based hedonism. But what is clear is that Bourdieu did not neglect the claims of high cultural values and experience to be beyond the cash nexus and, more generally, to be immeasurable; to the contrary, his argument has been that it is in the very claim to be immeasurable and beyond commercial considerations that high cultural experience – understood in terms of the relational social value that is attached to it – is constituted.

In short, then, I don't see that there is any difficulty, in principle, about measuring high cultural tastes and values. Nor do I think that it's valid to place commodities – including those of the cultural industries – on the one side of a divide and high culture on another. This is surely not so. Today, all forms of culture – except, perhaps, for a what Raymond Williams would have called the residual cultures of earlier social forms ('folk culture') – are, irrespective of how we classify them (as high/low; bourgeois/popular), now fully integrated into commodity production so that it makes no sense, if it ever did, to think of high culture as somehow outside the circuits of commodity production and distribution.

But I also want to suggest that thinking of high culture in these terms – as a niche market rather than as the site for a set of transcendent values – can prove to be helpful in policy terms in inhibiting the tendency for significant cultural policy options to be mortgaged in advance by according a questionable privilege to high cultural values within the policy process. For, paradoxically, the major difficulty over the post-war period in the two policy jurisdictions with which I am most familiar – Australia and Britain – has been not that of giving high culture its due but of stopping it running off with the lion's share of what has been, in any case, a pretty small cake. And this has been mainly due to the role which criteria of 'excellence' have played in the funding procedures of bodies like the UK Arts Council and the Australia Council in the context of arm's length principles of government in which the responsibility for interpreting those criteria is vested with experts exercising the principles of peer evaluation. The perspective from which such procedures have been criticised have varied depending on what have been the key cultural stress points of the periods and context concerned: for their class or their gender

bias in the 1960 and 1970s, or for their ethnic or racial bias as – in the 1980s and 1990s – the debates around multiculturalism and cultural diversity have become the key social pressure points on the agendas of cultural policy. And there is little doubt that these have flushed into the open the racial biases that have been implicit both in the hierarchies of aesthetic judgement that have informed the operations of arts and cultural policy bureaux and in the conceptual structures of western philosophical aesthetics in ways that have enriched and deepened the relativising effect of Bourdieu's and earlier feminist criticisms: I have in mind here Paul Gilroy's discussion of Kant's exclusion of Negroes from the possibility of experiencing either the beautiful or the sublime.

From this point of view, then, we need ways of measuring cultural tastes and values that will assist the development of cultural policies that will be 'beyond aesthetics' in the sense of recognising that, in complex, culturally diverse societies, there is no single hierarchy of cultural values in play of the kind that was supposed in the earlier development of western cultural policies. This is now widely recognised in official cultural policy discourse – eg the Council of Europe text *In from the Margins*, or UNESCO's *Our Creative Diversity* – as the shift from a culture and democracy perspective (striving to equalise conditions of access to an accepted standard of high culture) to one of cultural democracy (aiming for dispersed patterns of support based on an acceptance of a parity of esteem for the aesthetic values and tastes of different groups within culturally diverse societies).

With these general remarks in mind, then, let me turn to the two readings.

The first one – the chapter ‘Culture and Policy’ from *Culture: A Reformer’s Science*. As you’ll see, this was prompted by local Australian debates about the relations between cultural studies and cultural policy studies – and about whether the latter could be a proper field of engagement for any self-respecting critical intellectual; although this has not just been restricted to Australia – Jameson has taken issue with it and, more generally, Said has constructed an influential polarity which places critical intellectuals on one side of a divide and intellectuals working in policy bureaux on another. What I wanted to distil from these debates is not what they had in common with those forms of ultra-leftism which opposed any kind of truck with the state whatsoever but rather those objections that pertained specifically to the prospect of bringing culture and policy together. And, of course, what is behind these is the legacy of aesthetics as a separate realm – which got me thinking about Adorno (whose rebuttal of Lazarsfeld’s demand for greater empirical precision with the barb that ‘culture might be precisely that condition that excludes a mentality capable of measuring it’ might have fitted well in the workshop blurb) and his classic essay ‘Culture and administration’ in which, while being posited as opposites, culture and administration are also portrayed as being systemically tangled up with one another in historically specific patterns of interaction that there can be no escape from:

Whoever speaks of culture speaks of administration as well, whether this is his intention or not. The combination of so many things lacking a common denominator — such as philosophy and religion, science and art, forms of conduct and mores — and finally the inclusion of the objective spirit of an age in the single word ‘culture’ betrays from the outset the administrative view, the task of which, looking down from on high, is to assemble, distribute, evaluate and organise ...

At the same time, however — according to German concepts — culture is opposed to administration. Culture would like to be higher and more pure, something untouchable which cannot be tailored according to any tactical or technical considerations. In educated language, this line of thought makes reference to the autonomy of culture. Popular opinion even takes pleasure in associating the concept of personality with it. Culture is viewed as the manifestation of pure humanity without regard for its functional relationships within society... (Adorno, 1991: 93)

This tension suffuses the essay: culture cannot but be administered, but it cannot help but suffer as a consequence. But what Adorno does not do – à la Jameson or Said – is seek to extricate the intellectual from the contradictions this generates; to the contrary, he thrusts the intellectual into their centre in the demand for an administrative praxis that will exhibit a Kantian self-consciousness of these contradictions by lodging that self-consciousness in the processes through which culture is administered in the form of the expert – the enlightened aesthete – who serves as the only force capable of protecting cultural matters from the market ('which today unhesitatingly mutilates culture', and democracy (in upholding 'the interest of the public against the public itself').

This is not a world away from the form those which post-war arts administrations have assumed through the development of arm's length funding procedures based on peer evaluation by committees of experts. The historical difficulty that this has run into,

however, is that the condition that Adorno assumed – that is, that there would be general agreement on the side of culture as to the ‘men of insight’ who would best represent its values in the administrative domain – no longer obtains as the realm of aesthetic judgements has become contested and pluralised in ways that Adorno could not have anticipated. It is in this sense that I think we have to think of cultural policies as now moving, and needing to move, beyond aesthetics. This is not to suggest that questions of aesthetic judgements are irrelevant; rather, it is a matter of more carefully defining and localising their relevance. Judgements of a kind which state that – within the context of a particular genre, or from the perspective of a particular taste community – this work is better than that, or of a kind which states that - for this purpose - that is better than this, are a regular part of the intersections between social and cultural life and, as such, are rightly in play in cultural policy processes. From this perspective, ways of measuring the value of different kinds of aesthetic experience to and for different groups are undoubtedly to be welcomed. But what I think needs to be resisted is the assumption, derived from western philosophical aesthetics, that relativised aesthetic standards can somehow be squared to produce a single set of aesthetic norms, and that these can be associated with high culture in ways that distinguish it – in principle – from more commercialised cultural forms. To the contrary, the conclusion I drew from my discussion of Adorno and to which I would still hold, is:

It is precisely because we can now, without regret, treat culture as an industry and, in so doing, recognise that the aesthetic disposition forms merely a particular market segment within that industry, that it is a particular form of life like any other, that it is possible for questions of

cultural policy to be posed, and pursued, in ways which allow competing patterns of expenditure, forms of administration and support to be debated and assessed in terms of their consequences for different publics, their relations to competing political values, and their implications for particular policy objectives — and all without lacerating ourselves as lonely subjects caught in the grip of the contradictory pincers of culture and administration.

But let me come now to the second reading by first, giving a context for it, and then outlining the somewhat different project of measurement it attempts in seeking to devise a way of assessing the different kinds of public value associated with different kinds of cultural funding.

The findings that are discussed here derive from a national survey of cultural practices in Australia conducted by myself and two Australian colleagues – John Frow and Michael Emmison – in 1994/5. The survey comprised an extended and revised version of the questionnaire Bourdieu had developed for *Distinction*, and its purpose was to explore the articulation of the relations between class, gender, ethnicity and culture in contemporary Australia – and, although more as an add-on than as an aim that informed the project from the start – to consider the policy relevance of the findings. When we came to do this, the policy context was a different one from that which obtained when we started the project – the somewhat buoyant cultural policy orientation of Paul Keating’s Labor government which, in 1994, published *Creative Nation*, a cultural policy statement which had proposed a vision for the role that cultural policies were to play in developing

Australia's cultural industries and its national identity as a progressive multi-cultural nation. But there was also a new emphasis signalled in the statement in the stress it placed on the need for the arts sector in particular to become less dependent on public funding and more alert to the need to becoming both more self-reliant fiscally and socially relevant through 'audience development' – that is, developing new audiences. By the time we came to write the book, however, the Keating government had been replaced by John Howard's conservative Coalition government giving rise to a deep and disturbing attacks on multiculturalism (concerned largely with the cultural diversity of Australia's post-war immigrant communities) and on Aboriginal cultural funding while, in the continued stress that was placed on audience development, the flavour changed from seeing this as a vehicle for promoting access on the part of new audiences to cuts in cultural funding – at least at the federal level – prompted more straightforwardly by the agendas of neo-liberalism.

In this context, in which not only the publicly-funded arts but public broadcasting and public education were under profound attack and in which an increasing stress was being placed on the operation of private markets in the cultural sphere; in this context, then we thought it would be useful to look at what our data might tell us about the patterns of access associated with private cultural markets on the one hand and varied forms of publicly-funded culture on the other. Our concern, if you like, was to find a way of measuring the value of the different kinds of publicness associated with different kinds of support for, following Bourdieu, what we called the works of restricted culture – ie those requiring the special kinds of training selectively distributed by the education system as

compared with the more generally available cultural skills that are needed to engage with more widely distributed forms of popular culture, skills that are nurtured by the culture industries as a means of developing their markets.

I don't want to discuss the findings in any detail except to note – unsurprisingly perhaps – that, viewed in terms of the democratic profiles of their publics as measured by their class, educational, gendered and ethnic compositions, public broadcasting led the field as being the most socially inclusive, followed by the institutions of what we called public culture (public art galleries, museums, and libraries), then by what we called subsidised culture (hybrid institutions resting on a mixture of public support and user-pays principles: ballet, theatre, opera, musical concerts) and, finally, by the private ownership of works of art, literature, and selected musical instruments as the most socially exclusive. I was most interested by the differences in the profiles of the public culture and subsidised culture sectors for the insight they offered into the different kinds of publicness they represented when viewed in relation to their histories.

That what realm of what we called public culture is considerably more democratic than that of subsidised culture is not particularly surprising given the different histories of the institutions comprising the two groups. Those comprising the realm of subsidised culture derive, in the main, from the courtly and aristocratic practices of distinction which — as the work of Norbert Elias has shown — were subsequently adapted by the bourgeoisie to their own strategies of distinction and continued to retain this aspect when they were translated to Australia. The high rates of participation of employers in these institutions shows that they still retain elements of this earlier function while also providing

important sites for cross-class forms of social mingling involving the employing, managerial and professional classes but much less so for forms of cross-class mingling involving the working classes.

The institutions of have their roots in the different histories giving rise to the distinctive kinds of publicness that were created by late-nineteenth-century liberalism in its concern to involve government in the cultural and moral sphere in ways which placed a premium on working-class participation. They were, that is to say, committed to bridging the divide between social classes and, as a consequence, were closely related to other, similar initiatives — to adult education, for example, and, perhaps more important, to the development of public schooling with, from the late nineteenth-century through to the present, highly developed and systematic connections with the education system of a kind that are more or less absent from the realm of subsidised culture. The effects of this are evident in the practices of teachers, who are far more involved in the realm of public culture than they are in that of subsidised culture, generating benefits whose public effects are multiplied as they are relayed, via the classroom, through the public education system.

It is, I think, with considerations of this kind that a post-aesthetics cultural policy should concern itself: that is, with ways of measuring and assessing the value of the different kinds of publicness associated with different cultural sectors and of directing the distribution of public funding accordingly.

