

Cultural *Policy* Studies?! *Cultural* Policy
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A Guide for Perplexed Humanists
by Lawrence Rothfield
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Working Paper

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The Cultural Policy Center

at the University of Chicago

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Cultural *Policy* Studies??!!? *Cultural* Policy Studies??!!? Cultural Policy *Studies*??!!? A Guide for Perplexed Humanists*

For the past several years a group of faculty at the University of Chicago has been convening, teaching, and doing research under the aegis of what began life as "The Arts and Humanities in Public Life Initiative," but now, after several name-changes, is being called the Cultural Policy Center. This waffling in nomenclature points to a real difficulty we have faced in trying to convey the object and kind of research we have in mind. One difficulty is that the term "cultural policy" suffers by association with an all-too-well-defined history of Stalinist or fascist cultural commissars, Ministries of Culture, and the monstrous perversion of arts and humanities into propaganda machines. "Cultural Policy" with a capital P strikes many as an "un-American activity," as one major foundation discovered to its dismay last summer when it proudly announced a new \$50 million program to support research in cultural policy, only to be peremptorily and viciously savaged in the press.

If the public finds the term "cultural policy" objectionable for political reasons, those within the university – and in particular in that sector of the university where culture matters most intensely – tend to find the term objectionable on what might be called epistemological grounds. Humanists have a hard time figuring out precisely what entity "cultural policy" identifies, and an even harder time figuring out why we should be interested in knowing more about it, or engaging in sustained academic research on aspects of it. Culture we are perfectly prepared to accept as an object of study (though we may argue vehemently about its boundaries), and we pride ourselves in analyzing the politics of gender, race, class, or sexuality that are played out via cultural works or practices. But what would it mean to study cultural policy rather than culture itself or the ideologies conveyed through culture? And in America, at least, we don't have government control over the arts and humanities, do we, so what policies would we study? And even if we could identify policies towards the arts or the humanities, why should humanists bother to study them?

That humanists should find it difficult to think of "cultural policy" as a real object of knowledge is natural enough. After all, the history of the human sciences and the division of the faculties create deep intellectual incentives encouraging us to divide culture from

policy. To study policies, we imagine, is to deal with measurable aggregates rather than aesthetic particularities; costs and benefits rather than pleasures and values; objective facts and figures rather than subjective experiences and meanings; institutions rather than texts or images – at least that's the way we like to think about what "they" do versus what "we" do. The bogeyman, humanists have been taught, is reification – the flattening of human complexity and meaningfulness to what Georg Lukacs called a “gray statistical mean,” and to avoid this evil most humanists take to heart Auden's famous commandment: “Thou shalt not commit a social science.”

The problem with such piety is that it gives humanists no purchase either on the social sciences or, much more crucially, on the governmental policies and practices that social scientists help influence. The eloquent critiques of humanists have had almost no impact on the behavior of the enemies of culture: obstreperous mayors, ideologue appointees to government agencies, museum directors or university presidents who conceive their institutions as corporations, religious leaders with moral axes to grind, obtuse journalists, vicious editorialists. Nor have humanists been particularly helpful to those social agents who can and do play sometimes extraordinarily positive roles in inciting innovation, preserving fragile traditions, or promoting community through the arts.

And make no mistake about it: what policymakers say about and do to culture has real and serious effects on what gets produced, performed, painting, published. The cultural impact, and even the intelligibility, of all these worldly powers is masked, to be sure, because so many are involved. It would be wrong, however, to imagine that because we do not live under a totalitarian or statist government, America has no cultural policy; it would be equally wrong to assume, as many humanists do, that America's cultural policy is nothing more than a reflection of the culture industries' interests. The reality is far more complicated than either of these views would suggest: precisely because America is so decentralized, the arts and humanities here are subject to a wide range of policies, private and public, formal and ad hoc, local and transnational, with disparate and sometimes conflicting objectives.

Most of these policies, however, haven't been functioning very well – indeed, some are positively virulent, at least from the self-interested perspective of a humanist. Excluding allocations for preserving deteriorating books, NEH funding fell 25% from 1982-1992, and hasn't improved since, [1]; foundation support for humanities scholarship is both dwindling and earmarked for projects that explicitly and directly further social goals; fair-use guidelines are not keeping pace with the rise of digital media, creating real blockages for scholars needing scholarly access to images and texts; and as the fiasco at the Brooklyn Museum's "Sensation" exhibition shows, neither the First Amendment, nor curatorial discretion, nor the non-profit mission of the museum can be taken for granted as safe. If things have not been going well for the humanities, it behooves humanists as a matter of survival to help develop intelligent policy ideas and well-researched information that can be used to defend and promote their interests.

But this doesn't answer the question, why *me*? Why should humanists get involved in issues that are better addressed by administrators, economists, lawyers, and the policy analysts in the Harris School? The answer to this question is that if you leave the support of the humanities to the policy people, they may not do it at all. Deans and college presidents are overwhelmed with the demands of administering, demands which militate against making intellectual trouble in any case. Policy analysts, on the other hand, have no particular reason to focus on culture among the many possible domains they could study. Unless they are incited to pay attention – as they were lured into what became environmental studies by appeals from environmentalists thirty years ago – they will not attend to the needs of humanists and other defenders of the arts and humanities. Without help from policy specialists, information will continue to be in short supply, even about such basic matters as the number, kind, and influence of scholarly publications enabled by fellowships or grants, or on the impact of pedagogical practices on students, or on the job market for Ph.D.s (a task which had until recently been left to the now-defunct literary-gossip magazine Lingua Franca). The arts world is better served in this regard, but even here the pickings are sparse compared to the for-profit world of the culture industry.

Even where such information exists, moreover, it is less than helpful, because economists, demographers, statisticians, and policy analysts evaluating culture often ask what many humanists consider the wrong questions and measure what many humanists consider the wrong things. Much of the research in this area has consisted of surveys of audience participation, economic impact studies, or the sorts of factoids marshaled by William Bennett in his Index of Leading Cultural Indicators. Even the best experts trained in mainstream empirical policy analysis tend to pose what dyed-in-the-wool humanists might dismiss as excessively blunt questions about culture – questions such as: who should pay for the arts and humanities? Who should decide what art and what area of scholarship gets funded? Who should benefit from the art and scholarship supported? Supporters of the arts and humanities need such research, but they also need to demand that every effort is made in this research to take into account the complexity of the effects of aesthetic or intellectual experiences and the difficulty of measuring the good that artists and humanists do. If cultural policies are defined by economic criteria, such as "those that regulate what has been called the marketplace of ideas, [influencing] the barriers to entry and the chances of survival and adoption of values, styles, and genres"[2], then the norms inherent to neo-classical economics – the bias in favor of efficiency and the systematic undervaluing of what are called "externalities" – are likely to dominate cultural policy research.

So humanists need to get involved if only to help keep their academic counterparts from making a hash of what they value. But what humanists often forget is that this cuts the other way as well: if they don't get some advice from policy wonks, humanists are likely to make a hash of policy issues they care about. The recent debates within academia about core curricula, growth in college enrollments relative to graduate enrollments, UNEXT, unionization of graduate student TA's, and the star system in academia, are nothing if not battles about policy. Had humanists defined these discussions as being about humanities *policy*, they might have been able to attract the intellectual support of

analysts who could have strengthened their claims by backing them up with empirical research or even, heaven forbid, economic modeling. An example: my erstwhile colleague Gerald Graff was writing a book arguing that the pedagogical structures of college education actually produce anti-intellectualism in undergraduates. To back up this claim, he told me, he surveyed his own students. Now, Graff is probably right, but he is unlikely to persuade skeptics based on such a survey. After some nudging, I persuaded him to work with the survey lab at NORC, which I understand is going to design a much more effective questionnaire that will elicit information he will be able to use, and use more persuasively and effectively.

I have been speaking about the *practical* interest that humanists might have in cultural policy studies. But this is, and should be, much less compelling than the *intellectual* interest that at least some already have in what I would describe – though they might not -- as cultural policy studies. At the University of Chicago, for example, humanists are thinking hard about disciplinarity, professionalism, cultural rights, government-sponsored street theatre, language policy in Macedonia, East German intellectuals and the Stasi, Chicago-school sociology's impact on the Harlem Renaissance, the responsibilities of public intellectuals, and the regionalization of American popular fiction. If you are studying the relations between cultural forms, movements, or practices and institutionalized relations of power; if your aim is to critique the ways in which images, texts, or ideas participate in normalizing or disciplining strategies or contest them; in short, if you are doing cultural studies of the politically *engagé* kind, you are already studying policies of one kind or another. What is the policing of which Foucault speaks, after all, if not policy in action?

This view of cultural policy studies as a natural outgrowth of Birmingham School cultural studies is associated most strongly with Tony Bennett, whose work on museums explores the ways in which culture, like the penal institutions in Foucault's work, came to be thought of as a political resource for governing, regulating and transforming subjects. Bennett helped establish an Institute for Cultural Policy Studies in Australia that is still very active, though Bennett himself has moved to the Open University in England.[3] In America, Bennett's work has strongly influenced Toby Miller and George Yudice, co-directors of the Project on the Privatization of Culture at NYU, but his brand of cultural policy studies has not taken hold elsewhere, at least not yet. One reason may be that the "civilizing project" has never been as statist or centered on high culture in America as it has been in the British Empire or France. But another reason is that Bennett's coming-out party in America was spoiled by Fredric Jameson, whose vitriolic attack on Bennett in the pages of *Social Text* set back the development of left cultural policy studies in this country by at least five years.

What struck Jameson as "obscene" was the notion that leftists should be "talking to and working with what used to be called the ISAs" (that is, ideological state apparatuses). This, Jameson warned, is a "sinister" form of "anti-intellectualism," presumably since it means one spends one's time talking with wonks rather than theorists.[4] But one could equally well argue that the risk of entering into conversation with one's disciplinary others is worth it, because it may provide better ways to speak truth to power. Left

intellectuals may, in other words, be able to learn something useful from non-Marxist economists, political scientists, sociologists, even property rights experts. If you are interested in resisting the star system, you might want to study Sherwin Rosen's "The Economics of Superstars," if only to understand how the system might be modeled. If you find a concept like "cultural capital" useful when introduced to it by John Guillory or Pierre Bourdieu, you might want to see how this concept is elaborated by Gary Becker in *Accounting for Taste*.

It is precisely this sort of cross-pollination between cultural studies and the "hard" social sciences that the Cultural Policy Program seeks to encourage. The three main prongs of our initiative all stress the importance of collaborative thinking.

* First, we are developing a curriculum in cultural policy studies grounded in a core course that Don Coursey of the Harris School and I have designed. Don's specialty is contingent valuation, mine the archaeology of knowledge. Bridging the disciplinary divide has been a real challenge, but an invigorating one, and the syllabus that has emerged will, we hope, serve as a model for other budding cultural policy studies curricula around the country. To help get the word out about this course, and to help build cultural studies as an academic field, we have affiliated ourselves with a network of universities sponsored by the Center for Arts and Culture (an embryonic cultural policy think-tank) that includes, among others, Princeton, UCLA, and Columbia. Our syllabus can be viewed on their web site [in PDF format] [here](#).

* Second, we have fostered interdisciplinary research on issues in cultural policy by calling for jointly designed proposals for which we are committed to finding funding. Our first call yielded three proposals: one to develop a way of measuring the complexities of cultural preferences; a second to study cultural policymaking at the state (rather than national) level; and a third to design a new survey instrument for assessing the aesthetic experiences of museum visitors. All of these proposals have already received initial funding, and we are confident that these and our other nascent projects will be brought to interesting fruition.

* Lastly, we've established a faculty-led workshop that brings together researchers from Anthropology, English, History, NORC, the Law School, and the Harris School on topics that are being gnawed on from very different directions. For example, anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli and legal scholar Richard Epstein both indicated independently that they were interested in indigenous cultural property rights, and agreed to be introduced to each other to see if they might co-organize a quarter's worth of workshop meetings on that topic. Epstein began by asking Povinelli why an anthropologist would be interested in the topic of the rights of indigenous people to cultural properties. She replied that she was generally concerned about the impact of capitalism on indigenous peoples in Australia, but particularly interested in a case now being tried there pitting aborigines against corporations who sought to buy up land considered sacred. Indeed, Povinelli said, she had been asked to serve the tribe as a consultant and potential expert witness. Epstein's response was, "That's funny, I've been

asked by the corporations to advise them!" From there they went on to trade ideas about how to understand what was happening legally and culturally in that case.

I don't think that the anthropologist lost her soul as a result of that exchange. Indeed, it has been striking how frequently in our cross-ideological interactions that thoughts that would seem imperturbably conservative can be turned to what even the most anti-law-and-economics progressive humanist would probably admit is a good use. The study that Don Coursey is undertaking to provide a contingent valuation of cultural goods, for example, may sound frightening, yet it is likely to help save endangered cultural species by showing that even though the public may not be paying for them they are still valued. For another example, consider what happened when Epstein, a good libertarian who worries about the government taking property from free individuals, turned his attention to the Copyright Extension Act of 1997, which added an extra 20 years or so of copyright protection and in so doing, as Epstein pointed out, created about \$50 billion in wealth for copyright holders (foremost among them the Disney company).[5] That money did not, could not, have come from nowhere, according to the principles Epstein espouses. It had to have come from the American public, who otherwise would have had free use of Mickey Mouse's image. Epstein's conclusion: the government ought to demand a quid pro quo – if not \$50 billion, at least something. And given that it is cultural creativity which is being harmed by the extension of copyright, that money would probably be most wisely spent helping promote the arts and humanities.

That a libertarian would come up with an idea which if implemented would certainly provide a windfall for writers, artists, and scholars is amazing in itself. Even more amazing, though, is the itinerary of this idea. Epstein gave his talk at our inaugural conference in January 1999, which was designed to maximize the chance that cultural policy ideas and theories will travel not just in academic circles but into the public sphere, where supporters of the arts and humanities can appropriate them. James Herbert, the NEH's head researcher, attended our conference, heard Epstein's paper, and headed back to Washington, where the Congress was once again debating whether the NEH should be throttled or simply be starved to death over many years. Herbert, I am told, popped into the office of Senator Christopher Dodd, who was unsuccessfully trying to enlist the support of Republicans for the idea of taking the NEA and NEH out of politics by establishing a national trust that would provide an endowment for each agency. But where to get the \$6 billion needed? Herbert told Dodd that an ultra-conservative guy from the University of Chicago had argued that a much larger sum was owed the public for the extension of copyright – at which Dodd, I am told, immediately rushed off – too late in the process, as it turned out – to sell this impeccably credentialed idea to Republicans.

One might take this as an anomaly, were it not that our second annual conference, on the policy issues raised by the Brooklyn Museum controversy, had a similarly rapid spillover effect on public debate and policymaking.[6] Not all the ideas generated in the Cultural Policy Center will voyage quite so far so quickly, but our experience thus far should make humanists optimistic that if they bring their very distinct kinds of expertise to bear on problems of pressing public concern, they can make a real impact.

If the Center succeeds, we will be able not only to make better ideas and insights more visible, but also to generate new and more powerful research on cultural policy – research that melds our university’s great strengths in the humanities and humanistic social sciences – in the social history of the arts and humanities, in public sphere theory, in disciplinary self-reflection, in cultural property rights, in the impact on culture of globalization and digitalization, and so on – with those of the social and policy sciences – in survey methodology, statistical analysis, law-and-economics, sociology, and so on. Chicago’s cross-disciplinary breadth, ideological ecumenicism and intellectual depth give us a distinctive profile among the cultural policy studies centers now springing up at other universities around the country. As one might expect, these reflect their own particular constellation of active faculty, institutional structures, and local cultural environment. At Columbia, cultural policy studies is being developed as an offshoot of arts journalism; at Princeton, as a sociological enterprise; at Ohio State as an extension of arts administration; at NYU, as a variant of left cultural studies. Other universities are putting more emphasis on the public and even commercial aspects of culture: at Harvard, for example, the Institute on the Arts and Civic Dialogue operates as an artist- and public intellectual-centered symposium. As one might expect, it is in Los Angeles that culture-as-industry sets the academic cultural policy agenda. UCLA’s Center for Communications Policy boasts on its website a blurb from President Clinton lauding it as "the premier educational institution setting trends in entertainment," while at USC, cultural policy studies is shaping up as professional training for media moguls at a spanking-new Center named for Norman Lear, who generously gave \$5 million to establish it.

These variegated emergent university-based efforts will, we hope, cross-fertilize each other over the next few years. This will require much dialogue between non-profit and for-profit policy analysts, between arts administration faculty and cultural economists, between arts journalism professors and experts in transnational flows of cultural capital or cultural hybridization, and so on. The good news is that these conversations across the divides between cultural studies, cultural policy, and policy studies are already under way, and that out of them will come fresh and much-needed policy thinking about culture -- what it is, how we should value it, and what we need to do to safeguard and nurture it.

Notes

* Revised from a talk given at the University of Chicago Franke Institute for the Humanities, 1999.

- 1) John D’Arms, "Funding Trends in the Academic Humanities," in *What’s Happened to the Humanities*, ed. Alvin Kernan (Princeton), 35.
- 2) Paul Dimaggio, "Cultural Policy Studies: What They Are and Why We Need Them," in *Journal of Arts Management and Law*, Spring 1983, 242.

- 3) Tony Bennett, *Culture: A Reformer's Science* (Sage, 1998).
- 4) Fredric Jameson, "On Cultural Studies," *Social Text*, no. 11 (1993), 29.
- 5) Richard Epstein, "Maintaining the Status Quo in Intellectual Property," online at <http://humanities.uchicago.edu/artspublic/conf1999/epstein.html>
- 6) Lawrence Rothfield, Ed., *Unsettling "Sensation": Arts Policy Lessons from the Brooklyn Museum of Art Controversy* (Rutgers), forthcoming.