The Development of Cultural Policy in the United Kingdom

Since the 1970s the debate about the perceived usefulness of culture led to an expansion of cultural policy structures and language at local, national, and international level. Whilst the idea of universal, autonomous culture did not disappear, it came under increasing scrutiny.

In the 1970s the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) began to put culture onto the international political agenda, reflecting increasing concerns about citizenship and the impact of post-colonial migration and displaced minorities within Europe. It announced the ‘World Decade for Cultural Development’ in 1989, followed by the establishment of the World Commission on Culture and Development in 1991. Its definition of culture was strategically broad enough to encompass artistic but also political concerns. In its major report, *Our Creative Diversity* in 1996, the authors acknowledged the growing clamour about the cultural dimensions of development, ‘as people realised that economic criteria alone could not provide a programme for human dignity and well-being’ (World Commission on Culture and Development, 1996: 8). Importantly, the UNESCO definition, whilst paying lip service to the notion of culture as autonomous and universal placed greater emphasis on it as ‘a way of life’.

Following suit, cultural policy statements from national and international bodies during this time were broad in their definition of culture. For example, Australia’s cultural policy strategy, *Creative Nation: Commonwealth Cultural Policy* (1994), deploys an anthropological meaning of culture: ‘the work of Australians themselves through what they do in their everyday lives, as communities and as individuals (whether it be as workers in industry, farmers, parents or citizens)’ (DOCA, 1994: 9, Bennett, T. 1998: 89). Similarly, the South African government’s
Creative Nation document also states that ‘arts and cultural policy deals with custom and tradition, belief, religion, language, identity, popular history, crafts, as well as all the art forms including music, theatre, dance, creative writing, the fine arts, the plastic arts, photography, film’ (ANC, 1996: 1, cited in Bennett, T., 1998: 89–90).

At the national level in many countries cultural policy became increasingly visible from the late 1980s onwards. Whereas before it had been done largely as a ‘labour of love’ (Pankratz and Morris, 1990: xiii), cultural policy studies began to grow in stature, generating a considerable volume of academic journals and books, prestigious annual conferences, and the creation of numerous university departments worldwide. Since the late 1990s, major think tanks in the United States, Europe, Britain, and Australia have also produced pamphlets and research about culture. There has also been some demand by those within cultural policy studies to have a more prescriptive influence on government policy (Lewis, 1990; Rothfield, 1999; Lewis and Miller, 2003). These academics have written for state and supra-state authorities, crossing the divide between academia and policymaking.

UK context

I have outlined a shift in the ideas shaping cultural policy in academia in various countries. More specifically, we can also see how this has been translated into practice in the United Kingdom with the move from a ‘policy-light’ approach to a ‘policy-heavy’ approach since the 1980s.

As suggested earlier, Britain’s post-war governments tended to keep a distance from culture, adhering to the ‘arm’s-length principle’. Government officials would ‘write the cheque’ but were, in large part, either disinterested in culture or else sufficiently satisfied with the judgements of the arts elite to allow them to distribute funding in their own, unregulated way. Even during the 1960s when the position of Arts Minister was created for the Labour MP, Jennie Lee, the government allowed the Arts Council to manage their limited funds with relative freedom from government guidance or diktat. The arts writer, Norman Lebrecht (2010) writes about how arts administrators in the Arts Council were at liberty to use their own discretion with artists, choosing to supplement their funds as and when required:

John Denison, the Council’s director of music from 1948 to 1965, would get a call at times from David Webster, the Covent Garden manager, asking him to drop by after dinner for a chat. On a