

Cultural Provision for the Twenty-first Century

The Cultural Policy Collective

Beyond Social Inclusion/Towards Cultural Democracy was launched at the *Eighth Independent Radical Book Fair* in Edinburgh on 11 June, 2004. The pamphlet is written by the Cultural Policy Collective, a group of educators, curators and cultural workers in the arts and media. In response to the contemporary poverty of argument, we outline an approach to cultural provision in terms which critique the historic inconsistencies and anti-democratic tendencies of government policy.

Despite the Blairite rhetoric of radicalism, current cultural provision owes its evolution to a top-down tradition first instituted in Britain during the 1950s. Since then, governments and their various agencies have vainly attempted to democratise 'unpopular' cultural activities and prestige institutions. Today, the desire to channel people through social inclusion and outreach initiatives continues to promote the logic of top-down, technocratic control, albeit in a more overtly instrumentalised form. Such 'ameliorative' policies are not only tokenising and practically unworkable, but they often continue to privilege formally attenuated and alienating forms of cultural practice. Neither do they do much to disrupt traditional institutional hierarchies. By contrast, cultural democracy belongs within a radical tradition which aims to unleash the democratic potential of cultural arenas that are already popular, although nowadays either bureaucratically regimented or dominated by the market.

We argue that publicly-owned cultural forums, currently under threat of privatisation or market-led marginalisation, need to be defended and extended. At the centre of our agenda is a call for a wider redistribution of cultural (and other) resources. Thus rather than investing in perennially under-used 'white cube' gallery spaces or specialist centres, our pamphlet extends the argument for transforming libraries into a network of multi-use cultural venues. A renewed library network could host and diffuse a range of cultural activities presently located in city centres. In turn, public libraries could be reinvigorated and better equipped to defend free access to knowledge in the twenty-first century. Information technology has already extended the role of libraries, but privatisation is likely to continue to impinge on reflexive forms of knowledge. Historically, public libraries have been places where people educated themselves critically and independently. That important legacy needs to be protected and strengthened through the promotion of libraries' wider cultural functions.

Another crucial site of contest is public sector broadcasting (PSB). Whilst the BBC's ability to speak in the name of the citizen has always been problematic, its public rhetoric is all the more exposed as broadcasting is increasingly justified only in the name of the consumer. If PSB is to survive, then it must be democratised, retrieving the BBC from both the market and the hands of establishment appointees. Only if it is given over to a pluralised governance offering much greater public participation in programme-making can the BBC overcome the founding untruth of the 'arm's length principle' and drop its pretence of impartiality. In this way, the BBC would become a more lively public forum, promoting democratic communication and putting an end to a moribund administration that clasps government too close behind a façade of independence. For the BBC, the cosy relations of the Keynesian post-war settlement can no longer function under the pressures of neoliberalism. As the pamphlet argues, the full political implications of such a transformation have yet to be grasped.

The exigencies of funding in arts and culture extend directly to issues surrounding ethnicity and 'race'. Under the social inclusion agenda, the discourse of 'cultural diversity' is endlessly deployed to celebrate multiculturalism and ethnic difference. However, our pamphlet argues that such instrumentality is far from benign and sits uneasily with the politics of vilifying 'bogus' asylum seekers as economic migrants. Historically, uneven capitalist development has brought with it mass economic migrations. Under the conditions of globalisation it has become difficult for the far right to hang on to reductive racist values; increasingly it has pinpointed exactly those it wants to exclude—above all, economic migrants. Whilst the far right is becoming more precise about the terms of its discrimination, Third Way politics, devoid of any notion of solidarity in the face of capital, can only be vague about the terms of inclusion. As we suggest, a concentration on the histories and experiences of immigration is the best means of opposing racism in the public sector. The vacuous celebration of 'cultural diversity'—the leader of the BNP now describes himself as a 'multiculturalist'—is something which the marketplace has appropriated and extended to a point of near meaninglessness.

The Cultural Policy Collective aims to generate critical debate and address a number of pressing problems raised by the current implementation of cultural policy. The deceptively reform-minded rhetoric of social inclusion is still with us, yet its policies are persistently found wanting in a period when the gap between rich and poor is growing, democratic accountability is in decline, and the reality of prejudice and discrimination refuses to diminish.

The pamphlet outlines the extent to which inclusion is failing to deliver its social justice goals and the way in which its policy logic is perpetuated by false promises of upward mobility. The fantasy of cultural transcendence—encapsulated by the film *Billy Elliot*—continues to saturate the British consciousness. However, if, as Raymond Williams once argued, 'culture is ordinary' then there is no reason why culture should not be the object of ordinary politics. As we argue, forging such a politics is now vital, not least to counter intensified forms of corporatist government in Britain which mobilise culture to obscure structural inequalities and to defuse the pressure for political change. The sheer vacuity of the official debate on cultural provision is striking in Scotland today, as elsewhere. We hope to arm our readers against the continual reinvention of shallow official language and technocratic methods which serve only to perpetuate social injustice.

The neoliberal discourse of rights and responsibilities is clearly made manifest in New Labour's cultural policy. With a wounding, economic logic, cultural provision seeks to engender entrepreneurialism through projects of the self. This position is implicit in the most recent policy document, 'Government and the value of culture', released by Tessa Jowell, the English Minister of the Department of Culture, Media and Sport. In a superficially seductive argument, she suggests that 'complex cultural activity' is the means by which the 'poverty of aspiration' can be overcome. But lying behind her beguiling rhetoric is the notion of 'governing by culture', a central plank of Blairite politics, a major goal of which is to transfer responsibility for inequality from state to citizen. The individual has only to embrace the opportunities for equality which arts projects mysteriously provide; inclusion is achieved ('inclusion into what, and to what end?' we want to ask) and

self-motivating tendencies are encouraged through exposure to high culture. Jowell's latest document is less a ministerial concession to the arts, than an attempt to bolster the authority of a failing policy. At no point does she refuse the instrumentalisation of culture or offer practical programmes to address sustained inequalities in cultural provision.

The invidious (and impossible) notion that social justice should be earned—a core aspect of social inclusion policy—has its historical roots in corporatist politics and the state's attempt to neutralise political struggle. From the point of view of cultural democracy Tessa Jowell offers nothing new: she enthuses over the improving capacities of high culture thereby providing the rationale for policies of access and participation in traditionally privileged art forms. It is particularly striking that she has nothing to say about reversing the privatisation of the mass media, a vital component of a democratic culture. Against the background of uneven subsidies and extensive audience non-participation in high art forms, Jowell's arguments lack any empirical basis on which to promote a broad-based policy.

Today, democracy itself is amongst the failing 'milestones' of inclusion in Britain. Under Blairism, electoral participation is gradually descending to levels seen in the United States. The far right is making electoral gains and a stupefying politics of celebrity gathers apace. Social democracy in Britain is suffering a terminal legitimisation crisis, marked most notably by acute working-class disenfranchisement. Social inclusion has done nothing to reverse this process, whilst related Blairite ideologies—communitarianism, for example—fail to offer any political resources with which to counter the challenges imposed by globalisation (this is, of course, precisely their purpose). In practice, social inclusion replaces *politics* and *ideology* with various vacuous notions of *partnership* and *culture*. Cultural regeneration projects, appealing only to the interests of the managerial classes, remove democratic power from ordinary people and diminish local political accountability. The administrative fix of postal voting cannot restore the complex political cultures of democratic decision-making now being slowly eroded across Britain.

Beyond Social Inclusion/Towards Cultural Democracy is a contribution to overturning this dangerous democratic deficit. Its rationale within the sphere of cultural provision is to expand the realm of politics and democratic accountability. It offers a challenge to corporatist visions of 'governing by culture' which can only obscure—and in practice do little to rectify—the social and political causes of cultural inequality. If the authority of social inclusion discourse is already disintegrating, then our pamphlet warns against the rhetorical seduction of its likely successors. Already the language of 'cultural entitlement' has been widely aired by politicians in Scotland and it may well figure heavily in the Executive's current policy review. But if this particular rhetorical quick fix is to acquire any meaning, its logic must include an entitlement to a contested politics of culture. We encourage arts workers and their audiences to take up this banner of contest. It is one of the many first, vital steps towards a better world.

www.towardsculturaldemocracy.net

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