

# Killing Culture (Softly)

Stephen Dawber

As this journal goes to press the fate of the draft Culture (Scotland) Bill remains uncertain. Released into parliamentary dead time late last December, it has lain around like an unwanted Christmas present, the product of a drawn-out and dispiriting process of maladministration. The consultative response appears to have been overwhelmingly hostile, whilst wider reaction to the Bill has been marked by political apathy and intellectual withdrawal.<sup>1</sup> Whether Scotland's new SNP minority administration can revive public enthusiasm for such a tarnished object seems unlikely. But in a fractured parliament they may try, perhaps by rewrapping the Bill in a thicker fold of tartan paper.

Apathy breeds bad government and this is a dangerous moment for Scotland's artists and arts administrators. The draft Culture (Scotland) Bill was not negligible; indeed, it marked a dramatic repositioning of the relationship between the Scottish state apparatus and its cultural agencies. Or rather it represented a stark formalisation of tendencies well-developed since devolution: stronger centralised state control of cultural policy; mounting bureaucratisation across the sector; the branding of national culture for promotional gain; an insidious instrumentalisation of cultural practice and erosion of creative freedoms; and a commitment to declining state funding and increased privatisation. Such processes are by no means clear-cut, but they do point to a renewed wave of neoliberal reform aimed at maintaining and reconstituting elite class power. The Culture Bill, then, marked a decisive turning of the Thatcherite screw in Scotland.

As all but the most compromised of Blairite hacks could tell, the draft Bill was a much reduced version of James Boyle's Culture Commission published in June 2005.<sup>2</sup> At a cost of nearly £½ million this had been a more widely consultative process which nonetheless ably performed the neoliberal trick of blurring the boundaries between public and private sectors, much to the latter's advantage. A technocratic fantasy writ large, Boyle's model of a top-heavy cultural development agency was both too costly and too distant from Whitehall's priorities for a timid New Labour Executive; it promptly thrust the Commission offstage. But whichever troupe has been employed, the general direction of cultural policy has, since devolution, remained the same. Culture in Scotland has been exposed to an enhanced corporatist settlement, increasing the authoritarian (that is anti-democratic) intervention of the state and opening organisations up where possible to exploitation by the private sector.

In its immediate detail the draft Culture Bill concentrated on three core administrative functions. First, the formation of a new funding agency out of the ruins of the Scottish Arts Council (SAC) and Scottish Screen, to be named (in one of those priceless formulations that quite gives the game away) Creative Scotland. Second, a shaking up of the nationally-funded institutions, most notably by collapsing them further into the state through the abolition of the 'arm's length-principle'. And third, a rolling out across local authorities of the then First Minister's pet policy, an advisory programme of so-called cultural entitlements. A mealy-mouthed agenda with little developmental ambition and largely dependent on existing structures, the draft Bill nonetheless performed one vital task: it would cost very little in either political or expenditure terms. Any route back to the social-democratic compromise of the post-war era was closed off definitively: no longer would expanding public sector cultural provision offer a margin of freedom at the fringes of commodity expansion. The politics of social democracy – including the possibility of tax-raising powers for culture – now has no place for any of the major parties in post-devolution Scotland.<sup>3</sup>

Instead, we have a soft neoliberalism in the

culture sector, firmly attached to an accelerating politics of what the geographer, David Harvey, has described as "accumulation by dispossession": a plundering of public assets for private gain.<sup>4</sup> Here the protection provided by the public sector – our common wealth – is raided and its value confiscated by private capital at the expense of public services, including increasingly cultural services. This amounts to a substantial erosion of collective freedoms, embedded in almost every policy feature of the draft Culture Bill: in the creative industries agenda underpinning Creative Scotland; in the shared services provision now threatening the national institutions; in the top-down delivery of cultural entitlements; and in the relentless, demeaning positioning of Scotland's artists as either service providers or creative entrepreneurs. Ever quick to quibble over minor details, it is alarming that leading arts administrators should either be too dull to recognise, or (more likely) privately complicit with, this neoliberal turn. Despite the criticism delivered up by the consultation process, the wider cultural politics of the Bill has remained substantively – and even perhaps deliberately – submerged.

Beyond its administrative edicts, three key features structured the politics of the Culture Bill, each an emerging feature of neoliberal cultural policy in Scotland. First, it was defined by a suffocatingly narrow conception of culture (something inherited from Boyle's Culture Commission) in which the major mechanism of cultural transmission – the mass media – was for the most part set aside. Not only is this to ignore the manner in which a majority of Scots engage their imaginative lives, but it is also to dodge tough questions of how equality in communication is to be achieved in a global media sphere now subject to powerfully anti-democratic forces.

Substantial broadcasting powers may still be reserved to Westminster, but this should not stand in the way of a national debate about a definition of culture premised on the threat posed to democracies by monopoly media control. The poor state of public service broadcasting in Scotland and the ongoing erosion of the Scottish press – significantly degraded since devolution – make the urgency of this debate abundantly clear. It was characteristic of the draft Culture Bill that when it did turn its attention to broadcasting it did so primarily in promotional terms, freeing up local authorities to advertise their services (a mechanism in the wake of the attempted housing stock transfers in Glasgow and Edinburgh that is unlikely to be benign). The desire of Scottish politicians to sidestep questions of accountability and ownership in the media sphere points to its political priority over other aspects of cultural provision. As anyone struck by the vacuity of much Scottish art criticism will know, there is unlikely to be transformation in other areas of public culture until the organs of neoliberal propaganda are brought to heel.

A second defining feature of the draft Culture Bill was its contempt for the relationship between culture and democracy, a deficit that reflects the wider hollowing out of mass politics across Europe linked to the neoliberal turn. Electoral entropy fuels cynicism, political volatility and, as Peter Mair has recently argued, poor administration, as the energy of collective decision-making is replaced by the vapidness of managerialism and presentational style.<sup>5</sup> That Scotland leads Europe in voter apathy – the turnout in this year's 'exciting' parliamentary elections was 51.7% – seems to be of little interest to cultural leaders.<sup>6</sup> Their supposed "unleashing of creativity" is conceived in primarily economic, rather than more traditional civic terms.

Thus the draft Culture Bill presented an unimaginative, top-down model of cultural provision, placing delivery onto existing

bureaucratic structures with little new money, and in the case of local authorities with no legislative authority attached. Above all, nothing – absolutely nothing – should be enabled to generate from below. Here, in the Orwellian language we have come to expect of New Labour, is the Bill's definition of cultural entitlements, superficially at least its most progressive aspect:

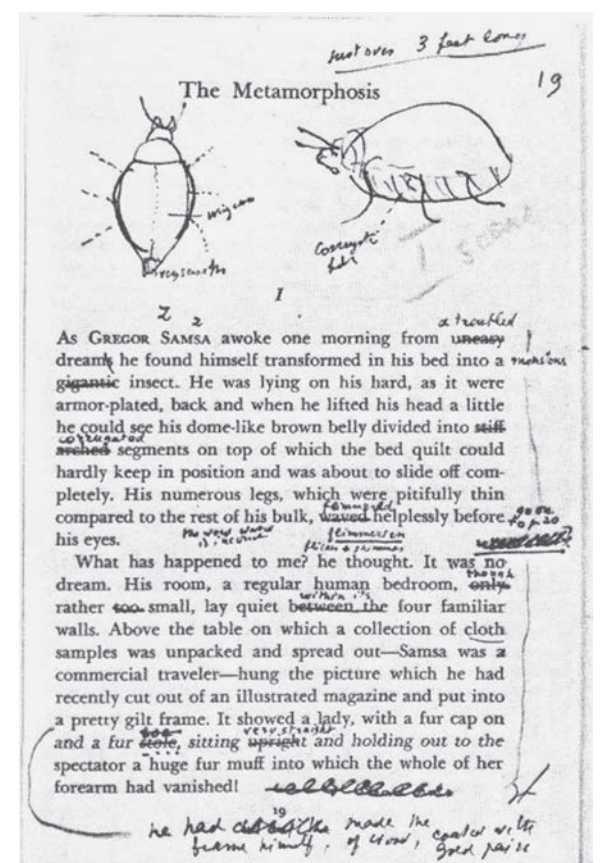
We have decided to call the new style of provision entitlements because we hope this will encourage more people to enjoy and participate in cultural activities. There is a general entitlement to adequate cultural services for the inhabitants of each local authority area. Local authorities will also seek to make available each of the activities and services they announce as entitlements, but entitlements will not represent a guarantee of access to any particular service.

We will not, it seems, be entitled to our entitlements after all.

All this fuels technocracy, the idea that the realm of culture is best directed from on high by technical specialists.<sup>7</sup> If the draft Bill was anything, it was a bureaucrat's wet dream, with all its rhetoric of "partnership", "cultural planning", "capacity building", "enterprise networks" and "quality assurance". Nowadays, this is largely the administrative art of making less go further; it involves delivering the policy objectives of business, the voluntary sector and other areas of (often failing) government provision. (This was cheerfully described in the Bill's guidance notes as "the application of creative skills to the development of products and processes".) Under the increasingly authoritarian direction of the neoliberal state, cultural provision is both rigidly economic and ruthlessly instrumentalised; cultural policy is no longer really about culture at all.

One effect of this methodologically dubious world of targets and monitoring is the opportunities opened up for New Labour's corporate friends: it may well be that the greatest scandal in the realm of culture since devolution is not the stage fright of unrehearsed ministers, but the ushering in of private sector consultancies backstage. By taking consultants seriously cultural workers are colluding in the destruction of the complex apparatus that has helped sustain their work over the last fifty years. Their parasitic relationship to the public sector erodes even further the possibility of democratic renewal.<sup>8</sup>

So this now is the soft neoliberal route for Scottish culture: delimiting the realm of culture to the non-media sphere; and denuding the public sector of its history of collective ownership and (limited) accountability. Both enable the third and central 'innovation' of the draft Culture Bill: the redirection of the intricate edifice of culture



to more narrowly promotional ends. Thus we are informed in the very first paragraph of the Bill's guidance notes that culture "is a defining feature of a successful and confident nation. It is a vital ingredient in our success, here and abroad". The unconscious repetition provides the key: "success" is to be defined reductively, a codeword for Scotland's enhanced economic competitiveness under capitalist globalisation. Profit is to be derived from the unique qualities of Scottish culture and the exploitation of what might be termed its monopoly power. National culture is to be harnessed more assertively to the goal of capital accumulation, and public money redirected to bolstering commodity exchange.

Central to the draft Bill was the boosting of the so-called creative industries, a key plank of New Labour economic policy since 1998.<sup>9</sup> According to this new orthodoxy, culture is a form of symbolic capital, offering distinction grounded in history and place, and therefore competitive advantage in a global market. For those who promote the creative economy, the state's cultural patronage must also be appropriated to accumulative ends. However, the enhanced monetization of culture generates both contradictions and dangers. These include the disneyfication of heritage and the possibility (perhaps well underway) that artists will follow the marketeers' agenda and bend their practice to suit the commodification of place. It also encourages local authorities to abandon democratic accountability in order to intensify their embrace of the private sector, seen (as reported elsewhere in this journal) in the recent transfer of Glasgow City Council's Cultural and Leisure Services department to a charitable trust.

Even in its own terms the economism of creative industries is a high risk strategy. Commodification threatens the very qualities of originality and uniqueness that make locations attractive to investors in the first place, values historically sustained by the public sector. Furthermore, the policy inevitably benefits those areas best able to compete for collective symbolic capital (city centres mainly), generating opposition in the regions and poorer suburbs.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, creative industries policy may well forge a localised cultural politics of resistance which might then be mobilised to ground international solidarities. The SNP has already signalled its interest in bringing creative industries more firmly into the heart of the cultural policy process, a strategy that is likely to prove divisive. Promotional culture may well become the canker that consumes Creative Scotland from within.

All this raises the crucial question of what cultural workers might do now. The consultation response to the draft Bill hints at a surge of antagonism as arts workers – often in discretely technocratic terms – mobilise to defend their slender autonomy against the pincer movement of privatisation and the authoritarian state. However, that collective expression lacks both principled leadership and defined tactics. Scotland on the whole is not well served by its cultural leaders; since devolution the field has become increasingly populated by political placemen, accountants, mock-radicals and managerialists. Most have little conception that their role is to defend culture in the public interest, sometimes within, but also crucially *against* the state. Furthermore, few, if any, seem concerned to define that interest, let alone offer up a definition to public scrutiny.

Neither should we hold out much hope for the Scottish universities, sites of cultural production now arguably more compromised than any other area of public life. Although open in the past to hosting collective discussion, the Centre for Cultural Policy Research (CCPR) at Glasgow University has long positioned itself as a glorified consultancy for the Executive and its cultural agencies. Whether it can recover its intellectual integrity under its new Director, Philip Schlesinger, is open to question (he at least is an advocate of an "open Scotland"). So far, however, the omens do not look good.<sup>11</sup>

But perhaps the area of greatest concern for readers of this journal is the future of the SAC. Unprotected by any heritage status or the accountability of local government, it is the agency that will most easily be degraded by the neoliberal strategy of accumulation by dispossession. If, as the draft Bill suggested, Creative Scotland takes

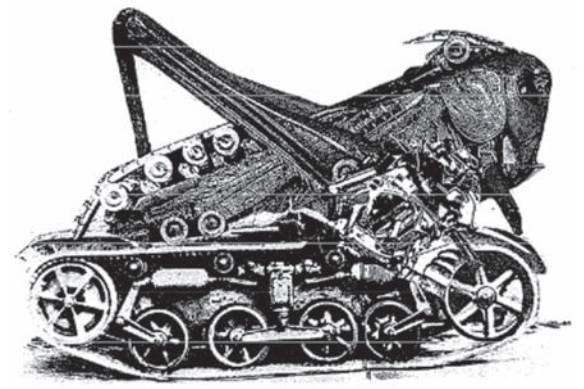
on the role of promoting a creative industries agenda, then it will become impossible to maintain the traditional public sector patronage function of the SAC. Scotland's artists should be hammering at the door of Manor Place day and night to prevent this happening. At a debate hosted by the Royal Society of Edinburgh in February 2007, the current Chairman of Creative Scotland, Richard Holloway, offered an abject defence of the draft Culture Bill, alongside the Edinburgh University sociologist, David McCrone. Indeed, it may well be that a sociology of post-devolution establishment complacency is precisely what is required, including comment on the disabling teleology of nationalist identification. How else to explain the fact that those vitally involved in keeping Thatcherite values at bay in the 1980s should now (perhaps even without realising it) be settling back and beckoning them in?

If this is a dispiriting prognosis, it puts a burden on cultural workers to organise themselves and build on the momentum of their response to the Bill. The rapidity of the decline in the margin of freedom under neoliberal cultural policy is troubling, to say the least. But amidst the caution of bureaucratic positioning there are some signs of resistance: the trade unions are more active in the field of cultural policy than ever before (Unison, Prospect, Equity, the Musicians' Union and the Scottish Artists' Union all expressed principled hostility to the Bill). In the absence of any serious political alternative unions are a vital presence; they must now help fill the leadership vacuum by devoting resources to critical policy research. At a workplace level, cultural workers should be doing all they can to defeat the logic of managerialism: its political caution; its negation of democratic contest; its casual subservience to processes destructive of cultural value. If the response to the draft Bill amounts to anything, it is a crisis of legitimacy for Scottish culture's administrative elite. Small acts of resistance may now take on greater weight.

Finally, the key task for cultural workers is to recover cultural policy from the miasma of technocracy in which it has become lost; or to put it another way, to replace governance with cultural politics. Currently amongst Scottish arts managers it is fashionable to express sneaking admiration for the cultural policy of Venezuela's Hugo Chavez, although it is unlikely that our *bien pensant* administrators will develop much of a taste for "Poder Popular" (popular power). But, unwittingly perhaps, they might just have a point: that the resources of a renewed cultural policy in Scotland today lie outside the boundaries of Europe – amongst the new social movements of Latin America, or buried in the writings of Mariátegui, Fanon, Cabral and Freire. Here is a real research programme for the CCPR, one truly in the public interest and, in the long run perhaps, a programme with less self-destructive consequences.

If, indeed, the Scottish Arts Council is to fold, then it might with its last vital shudder empty its coffers by commissioning a grand public art project. The world's poets would be invited to pen emancipatory *aides memoires* which could then be tattooed on the all-too-frail flesh of our arts administrators. Here by way of a coda is one for the torso of the Chairman of Creative Scotland: Bertolt Brecht's great poem, 'On the critical attitude', from 1938:<sup>12</sup>

The critical attitude  
Strikes many people as unfruitful.  
That is because they find the state  
Impervious to their criticism.  
But what in this case is an unfruitful attitude  
Is merely a feeble attitude. Give criticism arms  
And states can be demolished by it.  
Canalising a river  
Grafting a fruit tree  
Educating a person  
Transforming a state  
These are instances of fruitful criticism  
And at the same time  
Instances of art.



#### Notes

- 1 The 212 consultation responses to the draft Bill are available at [www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2007/05/1154331/0](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2007/05/1154331/0). Documents relating to the original Bill are available at [www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2006/12/14095224/0](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2006/12/14095224/0).
- 2 The Report can be found at [www.culturalcommission.org.uk](http://www.culturalcommission.org.uk).
- 3 It is worth recalling how significantly that margin of freedom was dependent on a more egalitarian taxation regime. Prior to a series of Thatcherite tax cuts from 1979, the basic rate of income tax was 33% (it is currently 22% and about to drop to 20% in April 2008), whilst the top rate has fallen even more sharply from a peak of 83% in the mid 1970s to the current rate of 40%. Crucially, the banding system for higher earners was abolished in 1979–80 and has not been reinstated by New Labour, meaning that there is no distinction between middle earners and the filthy rich. In the devolution referendum of September 1997, 63.5% of the Scottish people voted for the Scottish Parliament to have tax-varying powers, a statistic that has conveniently been forgotten by the mainstream parties.
- 4 David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, (Oxford, 2005).
- 5 'Ruling the void? The hollowing of western democracy', *New Left Review*, 42, November/December 2006, pp. 25–51.
- 6 Turnout was 51.7% on the constituency vote and 52.4% on the regional vote, an increase on the constituency vote of 2.3% over 2003. Low turnout seems to be significantly a symptom of working-class disenfranchisement: the constituency turnout in the Glasgow region was just 41.61%. For immediate post-election analysis see 'Election 2007', Scottish Parliament Information Centre briefing, available at [www.scottish.parliament.uk/business/research/briefings-07/SB07-21.pdf](http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/business/research/briefings-07/SB07-21.pdf).
- 7 The takeover of arts administration in Britain by technocratic procedure has yet to be properly explored. But for a vital first attempt at such an analysis see Paola Merli, 'The organization of culture between bureaucracy and technocracy: an agenda for the humanities', *International Journal of the Humanities*, vol. 3, 2005/2006.
- 8 For a jaw-dropping account of the influence of consultancies under New Labour see David Craig and Richard Brooks, *Plundering the Public Sector*, (London, 2006). A detailed study of the cost to the public sector of consultancy work amongst arts organisations in Scotland is long overdue.
- 9 For latest DCMS material relating to what is now titled Creative Economy Planning see [www.cep.culture.gov.uk](http://www.cep.culture.gov.uk). This appears to represent an intensification of the creative industries agenda and is due to be published as a Green Paper in June 2007.
- 10 For a brilliant exposition of some of the issues raised here see David Harvey, 'The art of rent: globalization and the commodification of culture', reprinted in his *Spaces of Capital: Towards a Critical Geography*, (Edinburgh, 2001), pp. 394–411.
- 11 Philip Schlesinger, David Miller and William Dinan, *Open Scotland? Journalists, Spin Doctors and Lobbyists*, (Edinburgh, 2001). The first publication of the CCPR under Schlesinger's leadership is a briefing document, 'Public support for the creative industries in Scotland' (April 2007). It examines "the level of support and expenditure for the creative industries sector in Scotland", but offers no critique of the policy or commentary on the political aspects of the creative industries agenda.
- 12 'Über die kritische Haltung', translated here by John Willett and reproduced in Bertolt Brecht, *Poems 1913–1956*, (London, 2000), p. 308.

*stephen\_dawber@hotmail.com*