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Introduction

In most parts of the world, the arts¹ are subject to the attentions of a large number of social institutions. They are taught in schools, where their study and practice are seen as a desirable, if not essential, part of a child's education. They form part of the school curriculum and are deemed suitable subjects for examination and qualifications. They are often assigned great importance by middle-class parents, who encourage their children to read serious novels, take up musical instruments or enrol in out-of-school drama and dance classes.

At university level, students worldwide and on a vast scale study novels, poems, paintings and artistic performances of all kinds. In Japan, for example, the number of graduates in arts and humanities subjects rose from 22,523 in 1957 to 163,928 in 2005; in Britain, from 26,845 to 97,465; and in France, from 3242 to 82,878.² Academics are employed to teach these students, usually with the support of government funds, and to add to the ever-growing body of arts research. New artists and performers pour out of the world's training schools each year. The art critic, Suzi Gablik, once calculated that in the United States alone the educational system produced as many graduate artists every five years as there were *people* in fifteenth-century Florence (1984, 100).

Most nations in the world now have government departments that promote and support the arts. Many of them also have Arts Councils, which have either been given the role of distributing government funds to the arts or of advising on how it should be done. According to the International Federation of Arts Councils and Cultural Agencies (IFACCA 2007), which identified 116 national arts funding bodies to invite to its inaugural meeting in December 2000, there has been 'an explosion of council-like or foundation-like agencies [...] in poor as well as wealthy nations'.

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As well as the Arts Councils and Ministries of Culture, there are, of course, all the artists and institutions they support: the arts centres, theatres, museums, galleries, concert-halls and festivals of various kinds. In 1991 Susan Pearce calculated that the number of museums alone amounted to around 23,000 worldwide (1991, vii). By now, the number will be far higher. In China, for example, the number of museums more than doubled between 1990 and 2007, rising from 1012 to 2200 (People's Daily Online 2007). Then there are the so-called creative or cultural industries, which encompass not only the multinational entertainment corporations but also the constantly shifting landscape of small creative enterprises. These are often represented as one of the fastest growing sectors of the economy. In Britain, for example, in 2007, they were said by Tony Blair (2007) to account for more than 7 per cent of the economy and to be growing faster than the economy as a whole.³

The arts also occupy a prominent position in upmarket newspapers. Most produce supplements devoted to the arts and culture and many have specialist arts editors. Universities, such as Columbia and Syracuse in the United States, now offer academic programmes in arts journalism. The arts are one of the mandatory 'genres' of public service broadcasting. Organisations like the BBC are compelled, under the conditions of their licence, to include the arts in their programme schedules.

Why is it that the arts have come to occupy this position in modern societies? What is it about them that attracts the support of governments, legitimises their place in educational institutions and demands the attention of the media? Much has been made in recent years of their contribution to the economy, their relation to 'innovation' and their place at the heart of the so-called 'creative industries' (Work Foundation 2007; Doust 2005). But even those who argue this case most strongly will usually concede that the economic role is secondary to something much more fundamental (Crossick 2006, 1). This is frequently expressed in terms of the capacity of the arts to transform the lives not just of individuals but of whole communities.

Mike Huckabee, for example, a former Governor of Arkansas and Chair of the prestigious US Education Commission of the States,⁴ maintains that it was his 'understanding of the transformative power of the arts' that led him to place the arts in education at the top of the ECS agenda during his period of office (ECS 2007). 'Challenge America', one of the flagship projects of the National Endowment for the Arts, promises to 'strengthen American communities through the unique power of

the arts' (NEA 2002). Arts Council England (2003, 2) tells us that 'the arts have the power to transform lives and communities.' One of the core values of Arts Council Korea (2007) is to promote lives 'enriched and transformed by art'. The non-profit cultural development agency *Culture Montréal* (2007) is 'dedicated to promoting the transformative power of the arts for individuals and communities'.

The 'cultural exception' provisions of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, which were agreed at the conclusion of the Uruguay Round of negotiations in 1993, were a political expression at the highest level of the special status accorded to artistic culture. Through these provisions, nation states were permitted to take measures to protect their arts, film and broadcasting industries from the free trade disciplines that would otherwise be imposed by the GATT. In the course of these negotiations, the French President, François Mitterand, observed that '[w]hat is at stake is the cultural identity of all our nations[...]A society which abandons the means of depicting itself would soon be an enslaved society' (in Shapiro 2000, 11).

This link between the arts and cultural identity is a concern not only of the French government. In a speech in 2002, the Canadian ballet dancer, Karen Kain, who was subsequently appointed as Chair of the Canada Council for the Arts, declared that Canadian culture was 'defined by the arts' and if funding to the arts was cut, Canada risked losing its cultural identity. Another member of the Canada Council, the music educationalist, Susan Knight, describes herself as 'intentionally work[ing] through the transformative power of the arts to create community, nurture culture identity, promote leadership and consciously develop critical agents of change' (Canada Council for the Arts 2007). In 2004, Knight was invested in the Order of Canada, Canada's highest civilian honour.

According to information posted around the world on its embassy websites, the arts represent what is unique about New Zealand. Its artists are represented as the 'the guardians of its dreams'. Its creative industries are said to be transforming the way in which New Zealand is seen by the world.

In his book, *Creative Britain*, Chris Smith (1998, 49), the British politician and New Labour's first Minister of Culture, also made the connection between the arts and cultural identity. Not only was the artistic and cultural life of a society the 'barometer of its health' but it was also 'one of the main factors by which we assess a civilisation'. The cultural life of a society, he went on to say, 'is that which defines it and gives it uniqueness and identity. It is the hallmark of maturity.' Like

Knight in Canada, Smith was also honoured, and elevated to the House of Lords in 2005.

It is tempting to dismiss these narratives of transformation, in which the arts change lives or define identity, as no more than rhetorical display or collective self-promotion. No doubt, in part, they are. But they are repeated in so many different national and institutional contexts, and often with a great deal of evangelical earnestness, that it is hard not to see them as the product of widely and deeply held convictions. Indeed, it is probably fair to say that a belief in the power of the arts to transform lives for the better represents something close to orthodoxy amongst advocates of the arts around the world.

However, at the same time, there is another narrative, one of crisis and beleaguerment, which circulates with similar ubiquity and which suggests that the arts are undervalued and in serious danger of collapse.⁵ In 1989, for example, writing in the *Financial Times*, Anthony Thorncroft (1989) declared that the 'British system is cracking up. The arts seem to have been in crisis for years[...] The Secretary-General of the Arts Council is convinced that doomsday has arrived.' Fifteen years later, on hearing that the Arts Council's grant had been frozen after several years of continuous growth under New Labour, another Arts Council Secretary-General announced that the impact would be 'devastating' (in Higgins 2004). For the composer, Michael Berkeley, this freeze in funding had powerful metaphorical resonances: 'What', he asked, 'are we – and history – to make of a socialism that freezes the creative sap of an entire generation?' (in Higgins and Kennedy 2004).

Ken Robinson, who chaired the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education⁶ in Britain before taking up a post as Senior Advisor on Education Policy to the Getty Foundation in the United States, also uses the language of devastation. In a published conversation with Robert Morrison, founder and chairman of the US-based Music For All Foundation, Robinson tells us that 'arts programs are being devastated in schools and school districts systems across America – perhaps not intentionally, but systematically nonetheless' (Education Commission of the States 2005, 4). Indeed, according to Shauna Saunders (2005, 12) a 'rhetoric of crisis' has been running through public American debates on the arts since the early 1970s. In his inaugural address, Dana Gioia (2007), Chair of the US National Endowment for the Arts, declared that '[t]he loss of recognition for artists, thinkers and scientists has impoverished our culture in innumerable ways.'⁷

In the arts faculties of many universities, the suspicion lurks amongst staff that arts departments are dispensable, at best tolerated and always

under threat. According to John Passmore, the philosopher and former President of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, it would be ‘a complacent error’ to think that the apparent growth of arts facilities signalled a recognition of the true value and importance of the arts. ‘There is many a university’, he wrote, ‘in which departments of literature and fine arts, although tolerated, are secretly despised, as consolations reserved for the weak-minded, providing them with a “soft-option”’ (Passmore 1991, 4).

In Italy, in response to proposals to reduce the arts budget as a part of a wider programme of public expenditure cuts, the film-maker Roberto Benigni lamented that ‘Italy is not interested in the arts anymore[...]Culture is being undervalued more and more’ (in Arendt 2005, 22). According to Stephane Lissner, the artistic director of La Scala, ‘the entire art world in Italy is in danger’ (Owen 2005, 52). However, Sarah Zalfen (2007, 273) suggests in her study of European opera that the problem is much wider, for ‘[t]he term “crisis” resounds throughout the cultural sphere of Europe’.⁸

Of course, pronouncements of this kind are prompted by real situations and are often specifically designed, however naively, to embarrass governments into changing their policies or making more favourable financial settlements. In this respect, they are no different from the dire warnings that are issued from time to time in respect of many other areas of public policy, such as health, defence or the prison service. However, the arts occupy a particularly fragile position in public policy, on account of the fact that the claims made for them, especially those relating to their transformative power, are extremely hard to substantiate.

These difficulties have been exacerbated by the growing prominence of evidence-based policy making. Originating in the medical field in the 1990s, and subsequently spreading to all other areas of public policy, evidence-based policy making was intended to signal the end of ideologically driven politics and to usher in a new era of pragmatism. Policies would be based on whatever worked best rather than on any predetermined political preference. Evidence would be gathered and rigorously evaluated in order to assess the extent to which policies had been effective in achieving the desired outcomes.

Whilst the ‘evidence base’ could be constituted from many kinds of information, hard data, such as facts, trends and survey information, were widely seen as the ‘gold standard’. Charlotte Humphreys and Ruth Levitt from the UK’s Centre for Evidence Based Policy and Practice (2007) have noted that ‘a hierarchy of the perceived quality and

usefulness of evidence has emerged, [which] emphasises so-called scientific approaches ahead of other methods in evaluation studies'. In other words, the evidence that is most valued in evidence-based policy is that which can be measured.

The production of measurable evidence that might throw light on the claims made for the transformative power of the arts is particularly problematic. For a start, the idea of transformation is so complex that it is impossible to imagine how it might be reduced to a set of measurable attributes. Moreover, even if it were, the number of potential factors effecting the transformation would be so great that it would be impossible to establish with any certainty that experiences of the arts had been the root cause. The aesthetic encounter, above all, is an individual subjective experience and, although it can be shown that certain elements of this are historically and socially determined, there are very real limitations to the extent to which further meaningful generalisations can be made.⁹

This to some extent explains the growth of economic and social 'impact studies', which have attempted to measure the impact of the arts according to various predetermined indicators. The majority of these studies have been commissioned or conducted in the spirit of advocacy by agencies with an interest in the promotion or advancement of the arts.¹⁰ Collectively, they have identified an enormous array of impacts, often coinciding with the priorities of whichever governments are in power at the time.

The arts have therefore been variously represented as an expanding sector of the economy, a major export earner and a stimulant to tourism. They have been seen as a catalyst for urban renewal, a business asset for a region and a cost-effective means of employment (Myerscough et al. 1988). They have been said to promote social cohesion and community empowerment (Matarasso 1997). They are supposedly able to reduce the prison population and improve health (Peaker and Vincent 1990; Staricoff 2004 and 2006); and they have even been seen as agents of social stability and the renewal of civil society (Keaney 2006). As Simon Brault (2004), Vice-Chair of the Canada Council for the Arts observed in a speech to Federal-Provincial Culture Ministers, 'all around the world [...] there is a keen interest in the specific relationship between arts and culture and the economic and social development of our communities.'

There have been two problems with this. First, the advocacy agenda that has underpinned most of these studies has blurred the boundaries between advocacy and research. Instead of questioning whether

or not the arts actually do have the economic and social impacts claimed for them, researchers have directed their efforts to coming up with evidence that they do. As a consequence, impact studies have suffered from methodological flaws, which have been subject to quite extensive scholarly critique (e.g. Hughes 1989; Hansen 1995; van Puffelen 1996; Belfiore 2002; Merli 2002). Most of these studies have been conducted by consultants, but academics have also joined in.¹¹ This has led to charges that the field is characterised not so much by independent, critical researchers but more by 'hired hands' (Nielsen 1999).

Second, impact studies, focusing as they do on economic and social indicators, do not actually engage with the real purpose of the arts. Whatever economic contribution the arts might make, and however much they might promote social cohesion and community empowerment, these are not the primary characteristics of the aesthetic experience. The arts may, as Simon Brault (2004) put it, be 'routinely called to the aid of ailing downtown cores, deserted or overpopulated urban areas, or neighbourhoods torn apart by violence and poverty'. But, as James Purnell (2007)¹² has recently observed, 'they would still matter if they did none of those things. They are intrinsically valuable before they are instrumentally so.'

The tensions between the so-called 'intrinsic' and 'instrumental' values of the arts have been played out particularly strongly in Britain, where evidence-based policy making was vigorously pursued as part of the implementation of the 'third way' politics that were the hallmark of the New Labour administrations. This required all parts of the public sector to make demonstrable contributions to government objectives and to meet specified targets.

As far as the arts were concerned, they were expected to contribute to a range of governmental strategies that included local economic development, place marketing and social inclusion. In 1999, the Policy Action Team 10 (PAT 10) report argued that participation in the arts and sport could and should effectively contribute to neighbourhood renewal by improving communities' performance in the four key areas of health, crime, employment and education (DCMS 1999). It was in this context that there was a further proliferation of 'impact studies', as the publicly funded arts sector sought to justify its 'usefulness' in relation to governmental priorities.

Inevitably, these developments provoked a counter-reaction, in which New Labour stood accused of neglecting the 'intrinsic value' of the arts and reducing them to a mere tool for the achievement of government

targets. ‘They’re a pretty philistine lot’, wrote the cultural historian, Robert Hewison. ‘They see the arts instrumentally, as a means to help achieve social and urban regeneration. They are only interested in the arts in so far as they can see them achieving the New Labour vision’ (in Kettle 2002). Acrimonious articles began to appear in the media¹³ and academics started interrogating New Labour’s rhetoric around the arts and questioning the very foundations of its cultural policy (Belfiore 2002; Selwood 2002; Mirza 2006).

Concerns over ‘instrumentalisation’ resulted in a number of cultural commentators and arts managers calling for a ‘restoration’¹⁴ of the so-called ‘art for art’s sake principle’ as the guiding rationale for cultural policy. John Tusa (2002), for example, Director of London’s Barbican Centre and a voluble critic of New Labour’s arts policies, complained that the language of government policy towards the arts failed to recognise their special nature. ‘The arts’, he wrote, ‘probably [are] instruments for social improvement, agents for social change, for social equality, or for community harmony. Yet [...] these demands [...] set a list of challenges which are not intrinsic to the arts, are distant from their true nature, and all of which could be antithetical to their basic functions and purposes.’

Government ministers eventually found it necessary to respond to high-profile criticisms of this kind. In 2004, the then Secretary of State for Culture Media and Sport, Tessa Jowell, published a personal essay entitled ‘Government and the Value of Culture’, in which she made the following declaration:

Too often politicians have been forced to debate culture in terms only of its instrumental benefits to other agendas – education, the reduction of crime, improvements in wellbeing – explaining – or in some instances almost apologising for – our investment in culture only in terms of something else. In political and public discourse in this country we have avoided the more difficult approach of investigating, questioning and celebrating what culture actually does in and of itself. There is another story to tell on culture and it’s up to politicians in my position to give a lead in changing the atmosphere, and changing the terms of debate.

(Jowell 2004, 8)

Jowell’s essay was by no means an unambiguous call for ‘art for art’s sake’ to become the central rationale for government funding of the arts, although it was interpreted as such in parts of the media (Edgar

2004; Fenton 2004). A number of residual instrumentalist notions still found their way into her argument, such as the part that culture had to play ‘in defining and preserving [...] cultural identity – of the individual, of communities, and of the nation as a whole’ (Jowell 2004, 16–17).

Also, in order to see whether ministerial pronouncements signal a shift in policy as well as in rhetoric, it is necessary to look at the detail of policy implementation. In this case, the relevant public service and funding agreements¹⁵ that were drawn up in the period following the publication of Jowell’s essay did not show much let-up in the demand for the arts sector to meet its instrumentalist targets.¹⁶

Nevertheless, in posing the question, ‘how, in going beyond targets, can we best capture the value of culture?’, Jowell (2004, 18) did at least appear to acknowledge that evidence-based policy making, at least of the kind built upon a narrow range of easily measurable indicators, had significant limitations in relation to the arts.¹⁷ Another government minister, the Minister for the Arts, Estelle Morris, had confessed a year earlier in a speech to the Cheltenham Festival of Literature, that she did not always know how to evaluate or describe the value of the arts and that it was necessary to find a new language (Morris 2003). This was echoed by Jowell. ‘We lack convincing language and political arguments’, she wrote, ‘for how culture lies at the heart of a healthy society’ (Jowell 2004, 8).

One organisation to take up the challenge posed by Jowell’s essay was the think-tank Demos, which published a pamphlet by John Holden, its Head of Culture, entitled *Capturing Cultural Value: How culture has become a tool of government policy*. In this pamphlet, Holden (2004, 10–12) held out the promise of offering ‘a new language for culture’ which would be capable of ‘reflecting, recognising and capturing the full range of values expressed through culture’. This new language would be expressed in Holden’s notion of ‘Cultural Value’, a new hybrid to be constructed from the ‘languages’ of economics, anthropology, environmentalism, intangibles accounting and ‘Public Value’.¹⁸ The key virtue of this approach, according to Holden, would be the adoption of a wider and more holistic notion of value than that used in current methods of impact measurement. ‘The recognition of Cultural Value’, Holden concluded, ‘will enable the cultural sector to achieve a working concordat between funders, funded and the public. Each part of the settlement is given due weight within an overarching framework that seeks to maximise public good to promote the vitality of culture’ (Holden 2004, 60).

Leaving aside the question of whether platitudes of this kind could be said to represent a new language, there was a deeper problem with

Holden's approach, which stemmed from its underlying assumptions. Whilst he offered a competent enough analysis of the dilemmas faced by those receiving government funding for the arts in Britain at the time, his perspective was still shaped by an advocacy agenda. Thus, although he was ostensibly searching for 'clarity' about the value of the arts, his real purpose was to find convincing methods that would validate public funding and promote a 'strong culture' (whatever that might mean), which was 'confident in its own worth' (Holden 2004, 60).

It was in the context of these debates in Britain that this book was conceived,¹⁹ although, as we have seen, the issues resonated far more widely. We recognised, of course, that public debate about the value of the arts in modern societies was, to a large extent, a consequence of government funding; and that without it, the debate about value would most likely have become a recondite affair, conducted – if at all – by *cognoscenti* far away from the noisy arena of public policy. But, as we have seen, the tendency to connect these debates to questions of funding almost always involved a slide into advocacy. Advocacy, by definition, excluded the possibility of a critical and open-ended interrogation of what the real value or impacts of the arts might be.

If advocacy is put aside, the notion that engagement in the arts can produce deeply transformative effects for both the individual and society very quickly becomes a much more complex proposition. It is, for a start, a proposition that has both an honourable and a dishonourable intellectual history.

On the one hand, the very idea that the arts can produce changes in the consciousness of the collective is forever bound up with the experiments in social engineering pursued so relentlessly by the Nazi, Fascist and Communist states. On the other hand, there is an enlightened European tradition, stretching back through strands of Modernism, to Matthew Arnold, English Romanticism and the Weimar theories of culture propounded by Goethe and Schiller, that sees the arts as the source of an 'ethical vision' and a repository of human values in an increasingly mechanistic world (Bennett 2001). This tradition, whose roots ultimately lie in classical thinking, is integrally connected with the education of feelings and the development of a particular idea of civilization. However, the values of this tradition have also been extensively critiqued from various postmodern perspectives as a historical relic, intimately associated with outdated forms of Eurocentric power, privilege and patronage. In its place has been posited a far more eclectic vision of the arts, embracing popular culture, sub-cultures and the myriad forms of cultural diversity. This,

in turn, has been seen by some observers as indistinguishable from a slide into an uncritical cultural relativism (Hoggart 1995; Scruton 1998).

These ideas reflect a complex intellectual history, with which it is necessary to engage if one is to move beyond the simplifications of advocacy and gain any real understanding of the value of the arts in modern societies. What has been striking about public debate on the arts, at least as it has been conducted in most of the English-speaking countries, has been the almost complete absence of references to this history. This is all the more surprising given that the value and function of the arts have occupied a very significant position within the Western, and particularly European, intellectual and philosophical tradition. No doubt intellectual history sits uncomfortably with evidence-based policy making as it is customarily practised. But that does not mean that insights from it cannot be brought to bear on the issues with which policy has to grapple.

The aim of this book, therefore, is to inform public and political debates about the value, function and impacts of the arts from the perspective of intellectual history. In particular, it explores the intellectual origins of common assumptions about the arts, throwing light on those twin narratives of transformation and beleaguerment, which we discussed earlier in this chapter. It also pays attention to negative valuations of the arts, which have been largely suppressed in contemporary public and political discourse. We have attempted to explore the full range of claims made for the arts over time, with a view to producing a taxonomy of the impacts and functions that have been articulated. As we shall see, it is an enduring feature of the history of these claims and counter-claims that assertions of value have always been fiercely contested. From this perspective, the consensus that advocates for the arts so earnestly seek, such as Holden's 'working concordat', appears not only unrealistic but also to miss the point.

The time-span covered by our review corresponds to the duration of Western civilisation itself. Claims for the arts are explored through the literary, philosophical and political literature produced within the Western, but mainly European, intellectual field from the times of classical Greece (fifth to fourteenth-century BC) to the present day. For obvious reasons, the collection of thinkers that we have discussed is not exhaustive, but it is intended to be representative. It ranges from major figures such as Plato and Kant, to minor figures whose contribution might not have been particularly original, but whose writings, by re-working themes and ideas that had gained currency in their own

times, had continued a significant intellectual tradition. What they all mostly share, however, is a vibrant, robust and often analytically sophisticated language for discussing the value of the arts. This adds weight to our contention that is not so much a 'new language' that is required in today's policy discussions, but the reconnection with a history of ideas that has much to teach us about current dilemmas.

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