

PROVOCATION PAPER

Gravitational Pull & Outdated Definitions

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Jenny Lees 1961 'A policy for the arts; first steps' organised cultural policy around 'the need to sustain and strengthen all that is best in the arts, and the best must be made more widely available' (Jenny Lee, 1964, p. 16). For Lee, this involved redistributing investment from cosmopolitan centres to locations of disadvantage, this being as essential to social justice 'as any movement of industry or provision of public utility service' (Lee, 1961, p10).

Since then, as the Gravitational Pull map shows, the sector has comprehensively failed in this effort. The findings of the West Midlands Cultural Sector Research Project correspond with an overwhelming body of research that demonstrates, with depressing regularity, that the funded sector has administered a program of inequality for decades - along lines of ethnicity, gender, age, geography and perhaps most notably class.

For those with a few years in the sector, the in-vogue rhetoric of 'ambition' and 'relevance' sounds remarkably like the rhetorical hits of yesteryear - 'the best... more widely available', 'quality and inclusion', 'excellence and access' - tedious laments that have seen the sector awkwardly grinding to the beat of its ongoing failure. Academic study and cultural theory have offered an intersecting mix of explanations for why the geography of our cultural infrastructure correlates so predictably with the locations of privilege; the short sightedness of culture-led regeneration schemes that placed costly flagships in wealthy urban centres; the middle-class dominance over a sector that privileges the

privileged, the neoliberal programme reducing cultural value to economic value; and the exclusionary nature of working conditions in the sector, where unpaid labour, social networks and industry jargon consolidate a closed set of institutions, impenetrable to those without the requisite endowments of economic, social and cultural recourses.

What all this research shows is that the uneven geographic distribution made visible on this map is the outcome of a deeper, structural system of inequality institutionalised in cultural policy and woven into the fabric of funding bureaucracy. So how is it that a sector ostensibly so committed to diversity, equality and inclusion has institutionalised inequality so effectively that the naked truth can be seen on a map? How has such a jarring disconnect between the rhetoric of relevance and the destinations of cultural infrastructure continued for so long?

I would like to offer one (by no means exhaustive) explanation, inspired by recent research by David Stevenson (2016) and Gross and Wilson, (2018). The problem, as the West Midlands Cultural Sector Research Project suggests, is in the way the sector defines 'engagement'. The rubrics of participation upon which cultural policy is predicated are, in the main, determined by those institutions in which majority of people have no interest, inculcating what Stevenson calls 'the myth of non-participation'; the erroneous assertion that a significant portion of the population don't participate in culture - at all.

But, as Stevenson points out, there is no such problem - you'd be hard pushed to find a population within the region who don't enjoy cultural things of one sort or another (Netflix binges, listening to music, participating in sports, going to the mosque etc). The problem, made visible by broader audience data, is that very few people engage with *funded* culture (only the wealthiest, whitest 8%) - an entirely different

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sort of problem belonging to entirely to the funded sector.

The problem for most people, if they are interested, is the funded sector does not engage in the cultural activities that matter to them. In this respect, as the report notes, 'there are clear and marked socio-economic differences between areas where more of the population have benefitted from access to culture and those that have not – and this means that West Midlands residents have and make different choices around arts and culture – many of which are not reflected in the current definitions and ways of measuring engagement'.

And so, while implying that most people in the region have not 'benefitted from culture', the report makes a fleeting effort to escape the common practice of conflating parity of uptake with cultural non-participation, and what Gross and Bull describe as the 'deficit model'; an approach to measures of engagement that assumes people who don't participate in *funded* culture are in cultural deficit. This common system of thought relegates 'non-participants' and their cultural choices to second class status, maintaining questionable hierarchies of cultural value while providing a rationale for the funded sector to continue investing in what *it* considers to be 'all that is best in the arts', and justify this unequal investment by its effort to make this 'best more widely available' (or to use the current jargon - deciding what 'ambition' is and how 'relevance' is to be understood).

This, as revealed by decades of sociological research, is a middle-class power-grab by those few who occupy positions of institutional power in the sector. The funded arts – dominated by a tiny minority of privileged, middle class kingmakers - arbitrate on behalf of the state and ergo, the population, what 'the best' is, excluding those to be engaged from the discourse of their own engagement. This tiny enclave of the funded sectors workforce;

'have the power to classify cultural practices under conditions that put their own tastes to the fore and in terms of their own distaste of the tastes of others, means that they ultimately subject less powerful social actors to a kind of symbolic violence, which not only legitimises the systems of meaning constructed in their own interests, but also maintains extant structures of social inequality (Blackshaw and Long, 2005, p. 18)

If one accepts Stevenson's argument that, in reality most people participate in some form or culture or another, then the map of unequal cultural infrastructure is a map unequal cultural value and unequal public service, showing the forms of 'high' cultural activity the sector privileges and corresponding 'low' types of consumers it excludes, not only from its definitions of engagement, but also its quest for 'the best'. It is a topography of total system failure with respect to cultural democracy. And so, as long as the rhetoric of relevance is attached to the selective, exclusionary notions of cultural value that shoulder the career ambitions of a tiny group of privileged, consecrated cultural leaders, then the rhetoric of relevance is destined to remain a rhetoric that is irrelevant to most, and a geography of policy failure.

References

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