

— Justin O'Connor

THE GREAT DEFLATION

Arts and Culture after the Creative Industries

Culture is facing an unprecedented crisis as a result of Covid-19, and cultural workers are facing the brunt. Is there an alternative?

The adverse impact of the pandemic on the arts and cultural sector is widely acknowledged. The collapse in income and employment comes on the heels of a long-term decline in public funding and a growing precarity amongst cultural workers. The brunt of the pandemic, the ‘great unequaliser’¹, has fallen differently on full-time permanents and insecure casuals, on well-paid arts sector CEOs and the self-employed. The established patterns of inequality in class, gender, race, disability and region – well-documented long before the pandemic – have been reinforced. Whatever the effects of the different forms of support² provided (or not) by government to the sector, it is safe to say that any recovery may be a long time coming.

Cultural workers have joined their close relatives in the lower reaches of higher education, where, as in health, social services, public transport and social housing, ‘essential’ has become synonym for low paid and precarious. This is a stunning fall from grace. Only two decades ago culture, glamorously rebadged as the ‘creative industries’, was set to spearhead a revitalised UK PLC, regenerate our cities,

and remake Britain as the new ‘creative workshop of the world’. It was a global policy hit, going on to inform the work of governments and agencies such as UNESCO, UNCTAD and the World Bank. Some of that clings on in the UK’s 2018 ‘industry strategy’, the first since the bad old days of ‘picking winners’ in the 1970s, where the creative industries were to be part of the UK’s hi-tech competition³ with China. But the Tories slashed arts and culture funding, dragged their feet on their high-profile arts relief package, and gave jobs in the “Red Wall” rustbelt the rhetorical priority, not millennials sipping flat whites in the metropolis. In Australia, which claims to be the real originator of the ‘creative industries’, the meagre support doled out by the government had the caveat that this “was as much about supporting the tradies⁴ who build the stage sets or computer specialists who create the latest special effects, as it is about supporting actors and performers”. Lest we forget.

Whilst conditions for cultural workers should be a central concern, as livelihoods and careers, institutions and embedded knowledge evaporate, a return to a *status quo ante* is not feasible. Public policy for art and culture, a crucial part of our democratic contestations since the 1960s, has been eviscerated, along with so much of the infrastructure of social and cultural citizenship. This is not just the

work of the Tory austerity drive but goes back to New Labour and a creative industries 'imaginary' by which they positioned themselves at the cutting edge of global modernity.



THE CREATIVE INDUSTRIES IMAGINARY

This imaginary had an enormous influence on how art and culture came to be valued by the public, government and industry alike. Inclusion in the 2018 industrial strategy was the pinnacle of an ambition to establish culture as central to the post-industrial 'knowledge' economy, transforming the rebellious energies of the 1970s into the 'proper jobs' of the 1990s. The creative industries had emerged as one of the few explicit continuities between Old and New Labour. The Greater London Council's⁵ 1980s 'cultural industries' had coupled post-Fordist economy with popular culture and the radical politics of post-'68 social movements.⁶ Recast in new guise in 1998, the 'creative industries' offered the prospect of high-value, innovation-rich and meritocratic employment without requiring the kind of industrial strategy New Labour was keen to offload. Channelling the distant memory of Labour's 1960s Prime Minister Harold Wilson's 'white hot heat' through the radical revisionism of 'New Times',⁷ the creative industries helped New Labour to regain its hold on the future.

We should be wary of dismissing this as purely Blairite PR, as it captured a zeitgeist that ran deeper than the infamous 'Britpop party' at Number 10. For sure, the Dot-Com inspired rebranding of art and culture as 'creative' was pure spin, just as including IT and computing (inflating the employment figures by nearly 50 percent) was, as one insider put it, pure 'scam'. Yet the creative industries promised hope after the dislocation of the Thatcher and Major years. They held out possibilities for new kinds of meaningful work, for self-creation, and for grassroots micro-businesses transforming and energising our cities. The creative industries would redeem the promise of culture – especially post-sixties popular culture – but by working in partnership with the market, rather indulging in patrician disdain or bohemian opposition. This appealed to the globalising technocrats so central to the Blairite project, but also to a 'Gen X', trying to make its way in the aftermath of Thatcher's counter-revolution.

By 2008 the shine had already worn off, and 'Generation Left'⁸ inherited the ruins. Despite the rhetoric, most creative industry growth was contained within IT and communications, largely benefitting the new media monopolists alongside the long-incumbent corporations. Freelancing and entrepreneurial 'independence' helped mainstream the 'gig economy',⁹ now increasingly absorbed into the networks of platform capitalism.¹⁰ Inequality in the creative workforce became further entrenched. Cities got their creative make-over, but the main beneficiary was global development capital. Many local and grassroots cultural economies were left to flounder or sink as 'cultural regeneration' strengthened its grip. While New Labour increased public funding¹¹ for the traditional arts, especially the GLAM infrastructure, this was accompanied by the punitively bureaucratic KPI¹² regime we have come to associate with 'actually existing neoliberalism'.¹³ Yet neither New Labour nor the Tories ever really took the idea of the arts as 'industry' seriously. When finally incorporated in 2018, the industrial strategy was not predicated on creative arts and

culture *per se* but focussed on digital and technological innovation (basically, consumer VR and AI), exportable screen content and opening new post-Brexit markets in China.

CULTURE AND THE RADICAL LEFT

The Left should not be tempted to unmask all this as a cynical ploy nor dismiss it as just the ideology of the metropolitan ‘centrist dads’¹⁴ who abandoned Corbyn¹⁵ in 2019. Its ending is a collective deflation, a puncturing of an imaginary which, for all its accelerationist, ‘acid Thatcherism’ overtones, represented for many a hopeful vision of the future. The imaginary of the creative industries absorbed the cultural politics of the radical left across a decade of demoralisation and defeat, preserving, for a time, the energies still visible in the final blaze of the Greater London Council. It ended by thoroughly debilitating the cultural left, hollowing out the language of democratic emancipation with the insidious discourse of homo economicus, the everyday vernacular of capitalist realism. The long march of social democracy through the institutions of cultural citizenship – education, public administration, the cultural sector itself – begun during the New Deal¹⁶ and accelerated after 1945,¹⁷ has been halted. The Gramsci-reading agents of ‘dark money’¹⁸ have succeeded, finally, in either turfing out an oppositional Left or subjecting cultural institutions to a slow strangulation. Those remaining have lost their capacity to articulate any coherent opposition, continuing to wave their statistics and impact statements¹⁹ at a government that relishes its ability to simply ignore them.

Under Corbyn, Labour responded to concerns about low pay, precarity and the lack of diversity in the cultural sector, with many welcoming²⁰ its concern with the more-than-economic value of culture. But nothing coherent emerged, as one might expect from a party riven by the political dynamics that underlay Brexit. If the technocrats and Gen X still looked to the creative heydays of the 1990s, many around Corbyn dismissed culture as post-68 identity politics. As with the Tories, ‘Blue Labour’ and the old left focused on those

generations left behind by global modernisation, bread and butter class issues uppermost, not millennial cultural concerns. Any cultural policy must begin to make connections across these divides. If a radical post-68 left²¹ is to re-emerge at the core of a new ‘cultural front’, a broad class-based politics in a new ‘popular bloc’, then it needs to seriously rethink culture after the creative industries.

A NEW IMAGINARY?

A Labour cultural policy should articulate a distinctive vision for the future, part of a wider hegemonic shift in social perspective, from post-industrial boosterism to social justice and a sustainable future. What might this new imaginary look like?



First, it would need to engage in a discursive struggle to return a sense of culture as both public value and participatory entitlement, part of what TH Marshall²² called ‘social citizenship’ – that inclusive bargain between governments and people which the last 40 years of neoliberalism has ripped up. It would

have to de-couple art and culture from an alignment with an ever-expanding consumer economy, and with 'creativity' as an economic input at the cutting edge of a 'post-industrial' creative economy. Rather, we would need to reposition culture within an economy of needs, an 'everyday' or 'foundational'²³ economy, re-aligning arts and culture with public services – health, education, social services or housing. Public services along with utilities, transport and food form a high proportion, often a majority, of the economic activities of local towns, cities and rural areas. Support for arts and culture should be combined with this everyday economy, not be hived off into some growth compact with a 'creative class'.

Second, promoting art and culture as part of a foundational or everyday economy, is not simply about providing state-funded culture directly to the public, but creating a mixed economy. Tony Judt²⁴ once argued that railways ought to be nationalised, but not necessarily the sandwiches. For decades now culture has been seen as mainly sandwiches. It is both. The premium should be on meaningful participation, the more local the better, encouraging a diverse set of organisational structures (co-ops, digital commons, rent collectives and so on) in a genuinely inclusive cultural economy. Much of this is being explored in the experiments of the 'new municipalism',²⁵ but remains latent in older forms of civic cultural amenities and services.

Third, the increasing intersection of culture with sustainability and Green New Deal thinking would be much better placed if culture was not regarded (or dismissed) as simply an 'experience' industry that deals in ephemeral and infinite desire – but rather as a route to participation in progressive social change and a vital component of what makes life worth living. Access to a public cultural infrastructure is a basic prerequisite for participation in the shared journey of our democratic life. Having the means to develop a taste for one's own culture, alone or with others, in the home or in public, is a vital freedom that such an

infrastructure can help to nurture.

Fourth, finding ways to challenge the precipitous rise in casualised, low paid work is paramount, as is addressing the lack of social diversity in the cultural sector. Such concerns have been centre stage for some time now and should remain so. But enumeration of inequalities is not enough; we need a vision of what fair and decent work might actually look like in the arts and cultural sector – a better idea of 'creative justice'.²⁶ Above all, we must recognise that culture is not just infrastructure, or economy, but imaginary, and that they all work together. In this we need also to reaffirm the value of art, not as discriminatory closure but as expressive life, that includes all texts and artefacts from pop music and video games to dance and installations.

The challenge for cultural policy is therefore to articulate a new cosmopolitan social vision, uncoupled from nationalist narratives, civilisational superiority or enlightenment hubris. Explicit opposition to the Right's manufacturing of regressive 'culture wars'²⁷ must be a given. The wider aim is to articulate the radical sense of a new communal luxury²⁸ in which art and culture are part of the everyday, and cared for, possessed in common as part of social citizenship. Defending the cultural public sphere is crucial; we need to re-enter and remake those institutions from which the broad cultural left has been ejected or in which it has been condemned to slow starvation. As was already clear in the political battles of the 1970s and 80s, new alliances with new social forces will be necessary. But above all, we have to overcome the kind of debilitating division between the educated 'elite' and the less-educated 'people', which Thomas Piketty²⁹ has outlined, and that has fuelled the 'populist revolt' of the last few years. The alliance between the 'social' and the 'artistic'³⁰ critique of capitalism, brokered in large part by the Trades Unions, lay at the centre of the 'cultural fronts'³¹ that remade the post-war public sphere. Fixing this ruptured alliance, after its exacerbation by the creative

meritocracy of neoliberalism, is surely one of our most pressing political priorities – and not just in culture.

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