IRISH JOURNAL OF ARTS MANAGEMENT & CULTURAL POLICY
ijamcp
#9
Volume 9, 2021-22

Culture is Bad for You: Inequality in the Cultural and Creative Industries by Orian Brook, Dave O'Brien and Mark Taylor, Manchester University Press (2020)

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Summary:

Culture is Bad for You: Inequality in the Cultural and Creative Industries investigates interconnected inequalities within the UK Creative and Cultural Industries (CCIs), producing a manifesto for change as well as valuable scholarship countering the 'celebratory discourse' in relation to the CCIs over the past 25 years.

Abstract:

In *Culture is Bad for You: Inequality in the Cultural and Creative Industries*, (Manchester University Press, 2020), authors Orian Brook, Dave O'Brien and Mark Taylor cut through a Gordian Knot of interconnected and complex factors that create and maintain multiple inequalities within the UK Creative and Cultural Industries (CCIs). Exhaustive research in micro and macro detail is presented over eleven chapters, drawn from a wide range of sources. This includes previous research projects that the core group of authors and others have produced including *Panic!* (2018), statistical evidence, surveys and longitudinal data. It also includes qualitative data in the form of extensive interviews with cultural and creative industry workers. The result is as much a manifesto for change as well as a valuable addition to scholarship countering the 'celebratory discourse' in relation to the CCIs over the past 25 years. (Friedman et al, 2017; McRobbie, A. 2016; Conor et al 2015; Gill, R., 2011).

Key words: cultural labour; creative and cultural industries; inequality

Review: Culture is Bad for You: Inequality in the Cultural and Creative Industries

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In the provocatively titled *Culture is Bad for You*, (Manchester University Press, 2020), authors Orian Brook, Dave O'Brien and Mark Taylor deftly untangle myriad interconnecting and complex factors that have played a part in creating and maintaining multiple inequalities within the UK Creative and Cultural Industries (CCIs). In examining these strands, they have created a book that will resonate with academics and non-academics alike, including arts practitioners and cultural leaders who are often aware of the barriers, but not always fully cognisant of the extent or systemic nature of them. Over the course of eleven chapters, exhaustive research is presented in both micro and macro detail, drawn from a wide range of sources. The book raises the question of who participates in, produces and consumes culture, and for whom? Closely linked to that question is how culture is defined; how those definitions affect the metrics used to survey engagement, and ultimately, a definition of what is "worthy" of public funding. This is supported by statistical evidence, surveys and also longitudinal data, providing valuable historical context.

The book builds on the previous research projects conducted by a core group consisting of the book's authors and others. One such example is the *Panic!* project of 2018, this helps add a sense of consistency to this long-term research throughout. It is through the qualitative data, however, in the form of interview extracts from artists, cultural workers and leaders threaded through each chapter, that the authenticity of lived experience is conferred. It is in the juxtaposition of these stories, with all the other forms of research that gives the reader a sense of context and also an understanding of how embedded inequalities are within the CCIs. As an actress and writer from a working-class background, with a career spanning almost forty years in theatre, film, television, and radio, many of the stories being told resonate strongly with my own experiences, particularly in terms of class and gender inequality. *Culture is Bad for You* is a rich and multi - layered investigation; as much a manifesto for change as a valuable addition to the scholarship countering the

'celebratory discourse' in relation to the CCIs over the past 25 years (Department for Digital, Media, Culture & Sport, 2020).

The idea that culture can be 'good for you' is not new. Few would disagree that producing, consuming and participating in cultural activity will generate tangible and intangible benefits, including individual and societal well-being, personal growth, community cohesion, health and wealth. There are also the more ineffable benefits of cultural engagement; for example, the transformative 'shared experience' of audience and actors within theatre, where beliefs and ideas can be examined or challenged. Over recent decades, there has been a shift in how 'cultural good' is defined and measured, with increased emphasis on culture as a catalyst for community regeneration, social change and wealth creation (Florida, R., 2002). In 1998, policy initiatives introduced by the UK Labour Government under Tony Blair, brought about a recalibration and broader definition of the CCIs to include IT, software, computer services, advertising and marketing. Recent (pre Covid) figures suggest that the CCIs are a lucrative and dynamic industry; a UK Government press release headline in 2020, stated that the 'UK's Creative Industries contributes almost £13 million to the UK economy every hour' (Department for Digital, Media, Culture & Sport). But this is a problematic narrative; broad definitions of the CCIs 'have the effect of masking clear differences in the occupational basis of these CCIs' (Campbell, P. et al, 2018).

Just as the definition of what constitutes the CCIs have broadened over the past thirty years, profound shifts in working patterns and class demographics have occurred. Socio-economic classification can be seen as an increasingly stratified picture within broader, older, class categorisations (Savage, M., et al (2013); *Office for National Statistics Labour Force Survey,* (2019 – 2022)). According to the authors, the decline in industry has seen a commensurate decline in the size of the working class and rise in the growth of a middle

class, of which cultural and creative workers constitute a 'micro class' (p18). The underbelly of that micro class is a 'precariat' of cultural freelancers – often highly skilled, motivated and educated workers, negotiating periods of unemployment or contracts offering low pay / no pay work as described in chapter six. Therein lies the conundrum at the heart of *Culture is Bad for You*; whilst 'research and policy documents make a compelling case for the positive impacts of culture' (p18), these positive impacts are not equally accessible to all - including those who work within the industries - and the results not equally shared. The rhetoric of 'You can get it if you really want' might ring hollow to those who are denied access to cultural work on grounds of race, class, gender, or disability. Ultimately, success or failure is predicated on the ability and resources to withstand hard times and this is not simply down to strength of character. *Culture is Bad for You* not only makes an in-depth investigation of the resources and capitals required by cultural workers to 'get in and get on', but also the various ways these resources are used to keep out those who don't have them.

The interconnectedness of the barriers to accessing cultural work, consumption and participation is explored in more depth in Chapter Three, Four and Five and the trajectory of inequality is clearly traced from childhood onwards. Across virtually all sectors of the CCI's, workers are drawn predominantly from the managerial and higher managerial class. (Figure 3.1a, p.59). The only exception is crafts (p.59). Thus, we see a cyclical pattern in motion in which:

> It is no surprise that there is a close relationship between who gets to accumulate cultural resources, cultural capital, in childhood and inequalities of parental class (p.133-4).

Depressingly, the cyclical pattern is further reinforced when what is produced by a 'micro class' is only destined to be enjoyed by another small group of people. According to the authors:

> Unfortunately, the sort of things produced by cultural workers, for example in theatres and galleries, form a minority of the population's rich cultural life (p. 83).

If the majority of cultural workers (and audiences) are already drawn from a small elite, this further compounds the cycle of exclusion on grounds of class, race and gender (DCMS 2017-18, p.85).

In terms of consumption and participation, what holds true for class can hold true for exclusion on grounds of race and ethnicity. People of colour represent less than 10% of those working within film, TV, radio and photography and the same is the case within the architecture, design and crafts sectors. In publishing, the figure is as low as 5%. IT, software and computer services report the best representation at 20%, followed by music, performing and visual arts at 15% (Figure 3.1c, p.61).

Chapter Six examines the 'endemic' phenomenon of unpaid and low paid work (p.148). A fixture across all cultural sectors, it is experienced (with slight variations of percentages) across all groups of cultural workers regardless of class origins, age, gender, disability or race (figures 6.1, p.147; 6.2, p.149 and 6.3, p.150). According to the authors: 'The prevalence of unpaid work creates a sense that low and no pay is how the system works. A sense that low and no pay is a *characteristic* of cultural occupations rather than the *consequence* of decisions'. (Italics authors' own, p.162). Not all unpaid / low paid jobs are created equal, neither are the cultural workers partaking in this work; rather,

> greater economic resources give access to much more rewarding forms of unpaid work and they allow individuals to carry the economic costs of no pay in return for their creative labour (p.163).

There is little surprise that class is a major factor in determining the type and sustainability of unpaid work available to cultural workers. It is intriguing, however, to discover how much age plays a part in the choice to engage in and sustain no pay / low pay work from both a current and historical perspective. For a number of respondents, presumably, an improved financial position and status had given them some autonomy when it came to doing unpaid work. Running alongside this was a strong historic 'recognition of coming from the "right" generation' in the past when they were beginning their own careers within the arts sectors (p.159). They had been, as one interviewee in her fifties put it, 'unbelievably fortunate' in their youth, citing free third level education and welfare benefits such as the Enterprise Allowance Scheme, which for a brief time at least would have given artists, including those from a working-class background, greater flexibility to work whilst still claiming unemployment benefit (p.161).

Chapter Seven *(Was there a Golden Age?*), disabuses the reader of the notion that there was ever a true 'Golden Age' for working class artists, however seductive the idea appears to be in the current landscape of cultural work and education. It is understandable to see how such a view might have traction now: since the 1990s, a number of state funded social welfare and educational support systems have been reduced or abolished. This has included state paid tuition fees in UK Universities since the introduction of the Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998, based on recommendations made in the *Dearing Report* (1997). In addition, benefit changes have also resulted in reduced access to unemployment and other entitlements (currently known as Job Seeker's Allowance and Universal Credit). As the authors acknowledge:

> Over thirty years ago when many of our older interviewees were starting their cultural occupations, the support systems were very different for a much smaller set of entrants into a smaller cultural sector (p.163).

It surely cannot be denied that the withdrawal of these supports has had a deleterious effect on young people trying to enter the CCIs, particularly those from backgrounds marginalised on the basis of class, race, gender, disability or geography. What is salutary, is the reality that even in the years when working-class entry into the CCIs seemed high, the ratio has always stayed the same – those from a higher managerial class always had better access to the CCIs (figure 7.2, p.182). The authors relate this period of absolute mobility as akin to the "long boom" expansion of professional and managerial jobs after World War II, allowing some working-class origin men to rise and enter into these professions 'alongside middle-class peers' (p.172).

Chapter Eight investigates upward social mobility into the middle and managerial classes through the stories of those who have experienced it and links this to the impact of what Nirmal Puwar (2001; 2004) termed the 'somatic norm' (p.191), the default value of 'White, male middle classness' within the CCIs. What is striking is how those who embody the somatic norm define and dictate the space given to those who do not. Attempts to change inequalities in cultural occupations are often based on suggesting that people should try to be more like that 'norm'. These approaches are often offered instead of changing occupations or changing society (p.192). In order to be accepted, one might find oneself being 'creatively constrained by the assumptions held by the decision makers' (p.216). Little wonder then that 'social mobility into creative occupations carries important emotional costs' (p.191), when moving 'into professions that have a middle-class culture' (p.196), especially for those who cannot draw on the domestic, professional,

financial resources and connections that their peers from the higher managerial classes might have access to.

How embedded the belief in the value of the 'somatic norm' is, is evident in Chapter Nine (*Why don't women run culture?)* and Chapter Ten (*What about the men?).* It is striking to see how those with the least power seem to take on a disproportional responsibility for their failure to surmount the barriers that confront them. As the authors state in the Introduction:

> Sadly we also see how our interviewees take responsibility for these structural problems onto themselves, as individuals. Again, this may account for why inequalities in cultural occupations seem to change so slowly (p.23).

When 'Mel', (all names were changed), an actress in her fifties, speaks of having to start at 'plankton level again' post having children, she points out 'And I was quite happy to do that' (p.242), the authors remark that:

> She (Mel) didn't highlight the failure of the industry to support her and her family. Rather, she suggested that this is what happened when women became mothers in the acting industry. Sadly, this was a very common theme in the discussions (p.243).

As has been previously discussed, whatever one might bring to a role in terms of talent, hard work and drive, clearly, embodying or representing the 'somatic norm', (p.191) can be of little harm to one's prospects. Yet, in Chapter Ten, the authors identify an interesting phenomenon; those most likely to have benefited from the privileges their backgrounds provided them with are also most likely to down-play those privileges, preferring instead to focus on the idea of 'meritocracy'. As reported by the authors:

> More generally, our respondents' attachment to meritocratic explanations for how people get in and get on in creative careers points to the marginalisation of issues of inequality (p.256).

There is a corresponding diminution of the role the respondents' appointments play in maintaining inequalities within the cultural sector. Those interviewees who *do* acknowledge the lack of diversity within their sector also draw attention to the intractability of the problem and their own helplessness in the face of it. The pointed title of one of the sections within Chapter Ten succinctly sums up this sense of impasse at the top and the lack of will to change it: 'The lucky gents who can't change inequality in cultural and creative jobs*'* (p.267*).*

Culture is Bad for You was completed just prior to restrictions brought in due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the preface, the authors expressed hope that the ensuing period of shutdown might create 'a chance to create a fairer and more just cultural sector' (p.xiv). In its conclusion, the authors focus us back to 'value of culture' and the 'value of persons' (p.282), asking commercial and state funded organisations: 'To what extent do they really, truly want that social justice and social change?'(p.282). During the early days of the pandemic, media attention and funding initiatives were focused towards saving and maintaining institutions and core companies, seeing them solely as representative of the arts sector. Freelancers often organised collectively among themselves to mitigate against the worst of the financial difficulties they found themselves in, until assistance finally became available (for example, the Bread and Butter Fund in Northern Ireland, started by playwrights Abbie Spallen and Fionnuala Kennedy). As Lyn Gardner warned in *The Stage*, however, these initiatives were further evidence of what was yet another example of how

poorly paid artists use their own time and limited resources to help artists less fortunate than themselves. Crowdfunding culture has exacerbated that with theatre's poor giving to theatre's poorer'(July 2020).

As we emerge out of this period, it is clear that there is an urgent need to reframe the relationship that many cultural institutions have with freelance artists and workers. This has to be done whilst being mindful that many state funded arts institutions are also underfunded and frequently in 'firefighting' mode. It is also true that wider society needs to learn some timely lessons from freelance arts workers at a time when casualisation, short term contracts, diminished unionisation and job insecurity cuts across the working landscape and increasingly, class.

Culture is Bad for You exposes the 'celebratory discourse' and reveals the precarious existence of many who work within the CCIs. In doing so, it holds a mirror up to the impact of neoliberalism upon the wider working world, begins a conversation that needs to be continued between arts workers and academics, and offers salutary lessons to us all.

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http://www.maggiecronin.com
https://pureadmin.qub.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/264746469/AAA_26th_Nov_21_The_Headcount.pdf

NOTES

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