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Book Review: *The History of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, 1943–2016: Between the State and the Arts* (Lara Cuny: Springer Nature, 2022)

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Abstract

Lara Cuny's *The History of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, 1943–2016: Between the State and the Arts* provides a timely and meticulously researched institutional and policy history of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI) from its wartime origins as the Committee for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts to its precarious place in the complex and contested post-Good Friday Agreement policy environment. Based on extensive archival research, Cuny's study shows how ACNI has navigated the challenges of pursuing an independent vision for the arts while securing its own survival in a deeply divided and politicised society. A central theme is the persistent imbalance of power between the ACNI and the state, fostering an institutional culture of caution and defensiveness.

Cuny critically examines the arm's-length principle, revealing its limits as a safeguard against political interference and raising important questions about its long-term viability in Northern Ireland. Through detailed descriptions of regional policy and decision-making in action —from early Unionist concerns to promote a unified cultural identity to more recent interventions under Direct Rule and power-sharing—she shows how successive governments have shaped institutional direction and arts production, whether through explicit political interference or through the promotion of instrumental and managerial approaches. She situates the Northern Ireland experience within broader national and international frameworks of arts governance, exploring the origins of the arm's-length model in wartime Britain and its application through the post-war Arts Council of Great Britain. She also helpfully paces it within the typology of state funding of the arts developed by Harry Hillman Chartrand and Claire McCaughey. Measured in tone and rigorous in method, Cuny's work is an indispensable resource for scholars, policymakers and arts practitioners concerned with understanding the intersection between the production of art and exercise of political power.

Keywords: arm's-length principle; Northern Ireland; cultural governance; arts policy.

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The Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI) has, by necessity, developed a powerful instinct for survival. Underfunded, politically exposed, and continually navigating competing political and cultural claims, ACNI has had to learn not only how to manage crises but how to leverage them to mobilise support among its stakeholders in the arts sector. Its response to the threat posed by the 2002 – 2005 Review of Public Administration (RPA) in Northern Ireland exemplifies ACNI's strategy for survival. Designed to streamline public bodies in pursuit of greater efficiency and accountability, the RPA included proposals to reduce the number of regional quangos and arm's-length bodies. Facing the potential loss of its grant-giving powers, either through absorption into a government department

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or devolution to local authorities, ACNI launched a series of stakeholder consultations, making the case that any threat to its autonomy represented a threat to the collective interests of the sector.

Like many working in the arts in Northern Ireland at the time, I rallied to defend the principle that funding decisions should be based on peer review, artistic merit and social need rather than political criteria and that decisions were best made at arm's length from government. In this way, defending the arm's-length principle served as both a rallying cry for solidarity and a legitimating narrative that helped to secure ACNI's continued existence. The Council's response to the RPA crisis established a template for fighting the many battles that lay ahead.

Lara Cuny's institutional and policy history of ACNI offers a timely study of the utility—and limits—of the arm's-length model as a mechanism for maintaining artistic freedom and organisational autonomy in a highly politicised environment. Whilst acknowledging the normative power of the arm's-length principle, Cuny makes the point that its formal existence offers no guarantee against political interference. While this may appear self-evident, Cuny's intervention goes deeper as she invites us to apply a critical lens to those taken-for-granted policies and practices that presume a seamless alignment between policy intent and operational reality. Critics of the arm's-length model argue that the illusion of independence and impartiality frequently serves as a mask for social exclusion and the privileging of elite cultural forms, values and interests. While acknowledging its contested status, Cuny does not argue for or against the principle of arm's-length governance. Crucially, the strength of her critique lies not in polemic, but in the detailed archival evidence she presents of policy and decision-making in action.

The arm's-length principle was developed as a means of institutionalising state patronage of the arts while maintaining a degree of independence from direct political control. It emerged from Britain's post-war welfare state as part of a broader project of national reconstruction and democratic renewal, and was later adopted by Commonwealth countries, Scandinavian nations and some former communist states. While successive governments integrated the arts into an expanding apparatus of public provision, their production, exhibition and appreciation were, nominally at least, preserved as the domain of private citizens acting together in the public square. More than a technocratic mechanism, the arm's-length model represents a distinct mode of public administration, one that exercises authority and distributes public goods through negotiation, strategic assertion and conditional compliance. Cuny helpfully situates the model within a wider typology of state arts funding, drawing on the framework developed by Chartrand and McCaughey (1989). However, the strength of her study lies in its close attention to the internal dynamics of public policy and arts administration as sites of social action and political negotiation.

Based on extensive archival research, *The History of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland* offers a chronologically structured account of ACNI's evolution, from its wartime origins through the post-war period, the fall of the Unionist regime, the Troubles, Direct Rule, the peace process and devolved power-sharing. Across this long and varied timeline, Cuny identifies recurring themes, notably the persistent imbalance of power between ACNI and the state, a structural condition that gradually fostered an institutional culture of insecurity and defensiveness. This power asymmetry is deeply rooted, dating back to the foundation of ACNI's predecessor, the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA NI), whose resources and political standing never matched those of its British counterpart.

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Supported by public figures of the stature of Maynard Keynes, Jacob Epstein and Peggy Ashcroft, the Arts Council of Great Britain (ACGB) was shaped by the mobilisation of national resources and collective experience of fighting the 'People's War'. Britain's CEMA had delivered music, drama, poetry and painting to village and municipal halls, factories and air raid shelters. Northern Ireland, by contrast, experienced a very different war: it was exempt from conscription, enjoyed relatively abundant food supplies, and suffered no air raids until mid-1941. The Unionist government, sustained by a permanent parliamentary majority and broadly indifferent to its Catholic minority, saw little value in spending public funds on bringing the arts to the people to raise morale. CEMA NI thus bore many of the hallmarks of the British model but lacked its prestige, popularity and influence. Government funding was not secured until 1942, and then only the meagre sum of £1,500. Cuny draws from rich archival sources to highlight the government's parsimonious attitude to arts spending, quoting a 1942 Ministry of Finance memo that questioned whether, in offering their modest grant, ministers might raise expectations beyond the war and find themselves tied down 'for all time' (Cuny, 2022, p. 42).

Another major focus of Cuny's study is the recurring pattern of political interference in internal decision-making, often at the level of operational minutiae, which consistently tested the Council's ability to maintain independence and impartiality. Ever alert to art's potential to disrupt surface appearances of harmony and suspicious of disloyal elements in the state, the Unionist establishment instinctively regarded artists and writers as potentially subversive. Unlike their British counterparts, Unionist ministers were never shy about challenging funding decisions on explicitly political grounds. For example, in the 1960s, the Minister of Finance objected to a grant to Belfast's Lyric Theatre on the grounds that its founding directors, Mary and Pearse O'Malley, were 'nationalists with a small, if not a big N' (Cuny, 2022, p.148). Cuny provides detailed accounts of earlier political controversies surrounding the Ulster Group Theatre's productions of Gerald McLarnon's *The Bonefire* (1958) and Sam Thompson's *Over the Bridge* (1959), both accused of portraying working-class Protestant life in a negative light (2022, pp.112–113). The attempts to suppress these works highlight how official mistrust extended beyond the Catholic minority into the state's own unionist family. Perceptively, Cuny situates these controversies within the foundational dilemma that haunted the Unionist state after partition: how to construct a coherent political and cultural identity in a divided and politically isolated region. Drawing on Gillian McIntosh's work (2001, 2007), she shows how official determination to promote a unified cultural narrative was driven by awareness of the deep social antagonisms and political divisions that threatened the future viability of the state.

Cuny's analysis of the Direct Rule period shows how the collapse of the Unionist hegemony did not eliminate but rather transformed the nature of political interference in the arts[1]. Without the legal protections of chartered independence enjoyed by the ACGB, ACNI remained structurally vulnerable at a time when successive British governments were pursuing increasingly instrumental approaches to arts funding. Cuny notes that the new focus on social impact meant that political intervention in the arts was increasingly aimed at managing community relations and promoting equality rather than sectarian advantage (see endnote). Cuny also traces the rise of managerialism within arts governance through the growing apparatus of auditing, benchmarking and performance reporting that followed the shift towards peace building through arts and culture after the Good Friday Agreement. Her treatment of European Commission peace funding and the Section 75 equality regime shows how instrumental approaches further eroded the boundaries between artistic and governmental agendas, with arts production being subject to increasingly technocratic oversight.

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Cuny's study provides important historical context to recent critiques of the legacy of art commissioned during the peace process-era, where funder-oriented approaches to evaluation, dominated by the logic of auditing have been shown to contribute to a culture of forgetting in which artistic form, content and context are obscured and even erased (Coupe, Hadaway and Jankowitz, 2024, pp.416–417).

Cuny's study concludes in 2016, the year in which responsibility for arts and cultural policy was transferred from the now-defunct Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to the newly created Department for Communities. The move sparked significant debate, amidst fears that the loss of arts and cultural focus at departmental level would reinforce existing trends towards outcome-based funding aimed at serving wider governmental priorities for welfare, housing and community development. Within ten years, the trajectory traced in the latter half of Cuny's study, towards closer alignment between the arts and the state, had culminated in a significant intervention. In February 2025, the Minister for Communities issued a Letter of Expectations to the Chair of the Arts Council, outlining his department's strategic priorities for 2025–26 (Northern Ireland Executive, 2025). While ACNI had only recently published a ten-year strategy informed by an extensive period of public and sectoral consultations (Arts Council of Northern Ireland, 2024a; 2024b), the Minister's letter insisted that future planning must now align with departmental priorities, while all public communications should reflect 'lines taken by me and my department' (Northern Ireland Executive, 2025). This prescriptive intervention, followed by questions in the Assembly (Hansard, 2025), suggests that the formal separation between government and the arts—always fragile—may have finally collapsed. Cuny's study may yet be read as an epitaph for the arm's-length model in Northern Ireland, if not for ACNI itself.

Long adept at survival, ACNI has never succeeded in articulating an independent vision for the arts in Northern Ireland. Continuously adapting to each crisis and aligning itself with ever-changing economic and peacebuilding agendas, it has yet to realise the potential of the region's diverse, resourceful, albeit frequently quarrelsome, arts sector to build a sustainable future together in the face of persistent funding and political challenges. Lara Cuny's detailed and rigorously documented history provides an essential resource for understanding the way arts policy has evolved in this fragmented, politically sensitive and volatile environment. With its measured tone, it will surely provide the empirical and conceptual foundations for further critical assessment of arts governance in Northern Ireland. For scholars, policymakers and practitioners concerned with the intersection of art and political power, this book is indispensable.

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Endnotes

[1] Cuny does not explicitly address the 1985 Direct Rule policy of refusing grant-aid to community organisations with alleged links or sympathies to paramilitary groups. Though not specifically arts-focused, this policy was used to exert control over (mainly republican-based) community arts organisations on overtly political grounds, including Belfast Exposed, the organisation that I later came to direct. For a critical reflection on its impact on autonomy and long-term artistic direction, see Hadaway (2007).

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