



Culture, creativity, community and civil renewal

Geoff Mulgan, Director of the Young Foundation

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It appears at first glance self-evident that culture must play some part in any renewal of community. It can help to revive a sense of possibility; it can bridge divides; it can help excluded groups to feel part of the mainstream; and it can create jobs. This sense of possibility has been enhanced in recent years by the proliferation of imaginative projects from Gateshead to Oldham, and from small community projects to the great national institutions in London. Despite the fact that cultural policy remains strongly geared to traditional (pre-20th century) art forms and to the consumption demands of the relatively prosperous, the last 20 years have brought a great deal of innovation. A Joseph Rowntree Foundation report in the mid 1990s remarked that arts programmes had been shown ‘to contribute to enhancing social cohesion and local image; reducing offending behaviour; building private/public sector partnerships; promoting interest in the local environment; developing self-confidence; enhancing organisational capacity; supporting independence and exploring visions of the future.’ Across the world mayors and political leaders eagerly associate themselves with creativity and culture, and very bold claims have been made for their effects on prosperity and jobs.

Because human beings are so affected by sensory inputs, by beauty and meanings, adding a cultural dimension to almost anything – from political campaigning to business or regeneration – can transform its impact. However, culture remains something of a black hole for policy-makers. The evidence base for the impacts of the arts on everything from poverty to health turns out to be rather thin when probed. Very few evaluations or studies meet the standards expected in other areas of public policy. Indeed the categories used around culture, the metrics and definitions remain vague. Despite claims to the contrary the available economic evidence does not show any predictable link between creativity and prosperity – and some of the world’s most economically dynamic regions are pretty sterile culturally. For all the talk of culture contributing to social cohesion even a cursory glance at any society serves as a reminder that culture can as often divide as unite. Often it appears to be just an aerosol for policy

makers to spray over other things. Its advocates are almost by definition the most articulate (especially those from the theatre); its cheerleaders the most well-connected (especially those from the opera); its opponents the most vulnerable to ridicule as ignorant philistines.

In this paper I therefore try to address the place of cultural policy, looking in particular at the role of culture in regeneration and community. I show that culture is sometimes in tension with goals of social cohesion and regeneration, and that care is needed in designing a cultural dimension into any strategy for community or economic renewal.

The three areas that link culture and community

Many forests have been devoted to defining what culture is. Our interest here is more clearly limited. We are concerned with a narrower definition of culture than the anthropologists: the production, distribution and consumption of cultural artefacts, services and activities that are primarily concerned with the transmission of meanings and symbols (so excluding, for example, food, clothes etc). We are concerned with how cultural activities in these senses either help or hinder the daily life of communities.

The words used around community – social cohesion, community cohesion, renewal – can disguise more than they reveal. To clarify the field I suggest distinguishing three areas of potential impact that matter most for poor communities. A healthy community will be one:

- that is founded on **mutual support and mutual understanding**
- that has a developed sense of its own **identity and potential as a community**
- that produces **wealth and opportunities** for those inside it.

Mutual support: For anyone life is likely to be better if they are surrounded by people who understand their aspirations and needs and can be drawn on for support. This is the daily dimension of social cohesion. It is helped when people are able to empathise and to imagine how the world looks to others, something which the arts can help with. The modern novel is an exercise in thinking through others' eyes; the best plays reveal what lies behind the words as well as the words themselves. Going beyond understanding, a strong community will be one in which people help each other and strangers; give time to common goals. As I will show some kinds of cultural activity can help with this; others certainly get in the way.

Identity and potential: Communities work best when they have a sense of their own power to shape their lives. This in turn is often closely related to a sense of identity. The practical question in any community is how to manage identity both inwards and outwards; projecting an attractive image to others, and helping

people to feel proud about the community they live in (so that they are therefore willing to commit energies and resources to it). That may in turn require that identities are cultivated which do not create compelling fissures within communities (Protestant/Catholic; Muslim/Christian/secular; working class/middle class) or at the very least prevent identities from hardening into mutual hatred. Identities do not arise out of the soil, or history, or culture in any simple way. They are much better understood as aspects of relationships; they are how people define an 'us', a 'them', and they can change rapidly (or rather people can choose to emphasise one set of identities at a particular time).

Wealth and opportunities: The third cluster of issues concern prosperity: how to translate the widely distributed abilities to make culture into a generator of wealth and jobs particularly in the poorest areas. This forms part of the broader question of how to generate prosperity and avoid the conflicts over resources that are so often a prompt for community conflict.

These three sets of issues gather together what we mean when we talk of healthy communities; each can be mapped, measured, and influenced by policy. And each of these also has a body of theory and empirical observation to draw on.

The roles of government

So what can be said with any certainty about the roles of cultural policy and government in relation to these three areas, and the various attributes of daily life that are described with words like community, social cohesion, civil renewal and social capital? How have the different currents of cultural policy contributed to these goals? In the next section I explore how the traditional concerns of government cultural policies intersect with these sets of goals, examining the seven main goals of cultural policy and how these help or hinder the goals of community building.

1. Tolerance

The first task of cultural policy for modern states has been to make space. For most nations and for most of human history the question of the relationship between state and culture has centred on coercion on the one hand – what should be banned – and the state's own culture on the other – what should be directly sponsored.

Thankfully the question of censorship is now relatively marginal to most governments. There may be an occasional uproar over a new piece of visual art, a TV programme, but artists have to go to desperate lengths now to elicit any real shock in national culture (and the various attempts of the Britart crowd to relive the glory days of Dada, surrealism and other modernist movements look decidedly unshocking). *Epater les bourgeois* is hard work.

However, this question of space and tolerance has changed in form rather than disappeared. Now the only real points of conflict are over conflicts between communities, and offense to minorities, not to the dominant culture, which is very resilient. The recent Sikh play *Bezhti* in Birmingham; the showing of *Jerry Springer - The Opera* on the BBC are examples where the state is asked to protect the sensibilities of a minority community against the claims of liberalism, and where if it pursues a policy of pure tolerance this is bound to be interpreted by some communities as an attack on them, a lack of respect. It was a battle over a book – Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* – which was in retrospect a decisive moment in the growing confidence of Britain's Muslim communities. Empowered communities will not automatically be tolerant and enthusiastic about iconoclastic culture.

2. State and official culture

The second priority for states has been to project their own culture and values. For many 19th and early 20th century states there was widespread belief in the need for the state to fill the roles being vacated by religion: to provide common icons and symbols, rituals and ideals for people to buy into. The priority was to build coherent nations out of the disparate elements at hand, and many of the greatest artists threw themselves into this effort. Communist regimes took this to an extreme, until all culture was state culture, there to breed compliance, enthusiasm, and drifting into kitsch. The European Union has spent large sums of money attempting to cultivate an authentic European culture that would make citizens warmer towards the institutions claiming to act on their behalf. We have some echoes of this in recent moves towards citizenship education and ceremonies for new migrants.

However, here too the terms of the argument have shifted: rather than imposing a national culture on a pre-existing diversity in the name of national social cohesion, states now try to validate a diversity of cultures and to legitimate themselves with minorities by incorporating them in an official culture. Ken Livingstone's Greater London Council (GLC) was one of the pioneers and tried to define itself through culture, with great festivals, film and video, community arts and exhibitions, all with a leavening of left agitprop, that were among the more stylish attempts to redefine London as diverse and modern. Many cities now try something similar to symbolise inclusion – for example Adelaide and Singapore's WOMADs.

This is even true at the level of honours and awards and public rituals; the work of bodies like the British Council; and of the big museums which have started to emphasise recognition of diversity in the very heart of official culture. Thinking about heritage has also become more inclusive as the Heritage Lottery Board has become interested in working class culture and minority cultures as well as stately homes.

Here again policy bumps into questions of identity, and of the underpinnings of community. Is it the state's role to preserve and nurture distinct cultural identities of, lets say, Punjabis, Cornish, metropolitan gays? In recent decades the answer to this has been positive, with an implicit assumption that greater self-confidence is an essential step towards full inclusion in society. But it goes without saying that this is not guaranteed; that greater self-confidence can as often be divisive; and that there remains an unanswered question on the role of a common heritage (even a common cannon), and whether the state's role should be a more overt one of seeking not just to integrate but also to assimilate (ie seeing citizenship ceremonies as a first step towards a more deliberately assimilationist stance in which absorption of a common culture is a precondition for social harmony).

3. Distribution

The third major tradition of cultural policy has been the distribution model. The idea of a modern arts policy really originates with the institutions founded between the 1920s and 1940s – from the BBC through to the Arts Council. Their primary rationale was that they existed to educate and improve, distributing great art and knowledge to the public who suffered from a deficit. The main means were grant funding, the main focus was on national institutions, and the areas of culture covered were primarily in pre-modern art forms (theatre and opera privileged over film, recorded music). All of this was to be managed through arms length bodies to prevent any politicisation.

The distribution model was sometimes given a rationale of social cohesion: sharing a common cannon of culture that cut across class and regional divides. This distribution model remains dominant in most Western countries. It was effectively extended to community arts and to the radical avant-garde in the 1960s and after, both of which remain very much dependent on state money (even when attacking the state). It remains the justification for many of the big investments of recent years from the Lowry in Salford to the Sage in Gateshead: making more culture accessible to more people.

However, some of its core principles have eroded. In an age of cheap distribution and copying few people are deprived of culture per se: indeed they live in a world where almost free access to all sorts of cultural forms is now feasible. The idea of a right to culture is even more tenuous than ever. It is also now much less clear whether arts bodies should consciously seek to develop a common repertoire or cannon which should be available to all; less clear how overt the hierarchy of forms should be (who should decide the relative merits of theatre and film, dance and opera?). And it has relatively little to do with the civic or the community since it casts the public mainly as receivers rather than makers.

4. Innovation

The fourth tradition of cultural policy has if anything been directly antithetical to cohesion. This is the view of arts policy as something equivalent to R&D: financing the invention and development of the new. This role can be given an economic justification through the language of public goods and market failure. As in the field of science, competitive markets will under-produce the more radical and innovative cultural forms and expressions, those that are far ahead of the market. According to this argument, as with fundamental science, experimental cultural products and services need to be funded at one remove from the immediate pressures of markets or political decision-making. Hence the case for the BBC's expansive role in commissioning new writing and music; for Arts Council bursaries for radical videomakers and painters and so on. The argument for public subsidy of innovation in culture is obviously weaker than in other areas, since the great majority of innovation takes place without any help of this kind – not just writers in garrets, but also underground recording studios, lo-fi video and so on. It applies primarily to the costly, capital intensive parts of performing arts and film. As in other areas of innovation the practical question is how to manage portfolios of risk and reward.

All the arts have depended in the past on tolerant and generous benefactors to finance the new; today this role is increasingly played by the state, though with a significant contribution from business. However, from the perspective of cohesion the obvious problem is that innovation is likely to be unsettling. Indeed it may be deliberately challenging. Public involvement in decisions over buildings and sculptures generally confirms the point (even the Angel of the North was opposed by a huge petition of Gateshead residents).

5. Economic renewal and prosperity

The fifth role of the state has been to encourage support for culture as a tool for promoting growth and prosperity. This is quite a recent development – only 20-30 years old – and prompted by the realisation that the cultural industries are now very large as wealth creators and as employers in fields like design, music, advertising and West End musicals. In London, over half a million now work in creative industries, more than in finance; and over one million work in culture across the UK, contributing 12.7% of GDP.

Some of the tools are now fairly well established. One is the focus on buildings that attract people into city centres or rundown areas: the museum in Sunderland for example has attracted some 800,000 visitors; the strikingly designed Peckham Library doubled visits; Tate St Ives brought visitors for the first time to a rundown rural area; and well-known developments like the Custard Factory in Digbeth in Birmingham and the Chocolate factory in Haringey all attracted people and spending into areas where it had been lacking. We know too that famous cultural figures can create value in their wake: Alan Ayckbourn's long-standing

commitment to Scarborough has won the town a £1.5 million theatre development, while David Hockney's association with Salt's Mill in Saltaire has been essential to its success.

But the hard evidence on the role that the arts can play in regeneration remains flimsy. Jonathan Myerscough's Policy Studies Institute survey, *The Economic Importance of the Arts in Britain* in 1988 was a landmark study, which presented the arts as a big employer (then of around 500,000 people), a big invisible export earner and regenerator of cities. The big developments in Glasgow, Liverpool, Manchester and Birmingham focused around investments in central arts institutions date to this period. Their premise was that they would attract people into rundown city centres, attract inward investors, and achieve a multiplier effect on the rest of the economy. These high profile developments were often followed or complemented by scattergun investment in community based facilities (partly to appease outlying areas that felt they were losing out) and more recently have been followed by more focused approaches to incubating and supporting arts and creative businesses (of the kind now being supported in London).

Many of those cities have subsequently turned themselves around and are far healthier economies than 20 years ago when they were suffering the worst shocks of deindustrialisation. A fair amount is now known about the dynamics of creative cities, mainly from the work of my colleague Peter Hall: for example, the role of migration, key institutions, sophisticated audiences, the ethos of milieux and what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls 'the field'. But less is known about exactly what governments can and should do and about what works, and we lack sufficiently rigorous studies to compare the impact of different kinds of cultural policies across a sufficient range of different cities.

At a national level there is no doubt that strong cultural institutions can have a spin-off effect, and not just through providing flows of trained professionals (one of the BBC's most important roles in the British cultural ecology). At the local level there is clear evidence on how the details of planning rules can support particular cultural industries (e.g. Melbourne's deregulation of music in bars, opposed by hotels, prompted a 20 year expansion of the music scene); how favourable taxes (as with film in the 1990s) can promote investment; and how licensing regimes – of local or community radio and television stations – can create jobs and demands.

But it is methodologically hard if not impossible to pin down the impact that spending on culture has on regeneration, or whether scarce resources could be better invested in other ways, for example in science or engineering. German cities, for example, spend very large sums on opera and symphony orchestras with little effect on their economies, and it is intuitively obvious that how culture is organised matters more than aggregate spending levels. The idea that there is some sort of 'trickle down' from big inner urban developments is no more credible than any other kind of trickle down or trickle out.

Equally, the experience of deliberately cultivating areas for cultural activity has been mixed to say the least – just as the broader family of policies to create clusters has been far from an unalloyed success. Overall experience suggests that clusters grow much more organically than through planning; government can move in behind an organically emerging cluster but it can rarely initiate it, and although sufficient subsidies may encourage organisations to congregate the resulting cluster may turn out to be culturally sterile (Sheffield's cultural industries quarter may be an example of this).

The buildings-oriented stance of the 1980s has also led to many problems in its wake – above all the problem of maintaining income streams in expensive capital projects, a problem shared by many UK lottery funded projects and by other places (Berlin is a contemporary case in point).

Too often cities have followed identikit strategies – and precisely for that reason failed to differentiate themselves. An exception to this is the very distinctive strategy used in Hay-on-Wye, whereby Richard Booth brought about the regeneration of the town by turning it into the world's largest centre for second-hand books and the location for a celebrated annual festival.

Culture may not be an unambiguous good. Many rundown cities gambled on attracting young people back in and some have been very successful, both in attracting residents to apartments in city centres and in cultivating nightlife. As measured by property values these strategies have worked; but they may have run their course. Young Foundation work on Leipzig and Manchester suggests that in the next few decades the ability to attract and retain young families may be just as important as attracting the under-30s. This will require distinctly different cultural policies, amenities, planning rules. The implication of some of the practical work in the 1980s, and the more theoretical claims of Richard Florida and others in the 1990s may be vulnerable on this point: the precise character of culture is what matters.

Moreover, although there is reasonably strong evidence on the importance of research institutions, tolerant climates and so on for new industries, it is less clear how big a role the arts per se play in this. In a recent edition of *City Journal* Steven Malanga showed that reality does not neatly fit the picture of an alignment of creativity, the arts and economic dynamism. Detroit, for example, scored very low on the Florida index but came second in the US National Commission on Entrepreneurship study and had 50 per cent more fast-growing new enterprises than the average; conversely San Francisco which scores very highly on culture lost 200,000 people in the second half of the 1990s.

6. Social inclusion

The sixth role of the state has been to use culture to include. This is a very recent concern. Culture remains the most glaring example of counter-distributive

spending – and even now is still geared to the cultural activities that are most prominent as markers for privilege. The long history of close links between the opera class and the ruling elite (look, for example, at the overlaps between the board of ippr trustees and Royal Opera House) demonstrates this. As a rule, ever since the 1940s state funded cultural provision has been monopolised by the middle class, while the working class have received most of their cultural nourishment through the market, using modern technologies, and often through US culture.

In the 1980s when some local authorities started to try to counter these traditions the tools were still imperfect: often middle class community artists and theatre groups benefited most from supposedly redistributive funding, and there were only very tentative steps to engage with 20th century cultural forms and industries. The efforts to use different sorts of tools to engage with other industries remained small scale – supporting video, publishing, community centres, recording studios.

Some broad conclusions can however be drawn. There is no doubt that for individuals culture can be a good route into training or work: there are now abundant examples (though less hard evidence) that cultural activity can contribute to feelings of efficacy: it can give people voice. The Collard report on the Manpower Services Commission's drama training projects showed that training in the arts could help to provide people with the self confidence they needed to find work, and many others have subsequently provided drama and video training for similar reasons. There is also plenty of experience of small scale initiatives that change people's mental landscapes through culture. The recent West Yorkshire Playhouse project in the Ebor Gardens area which aimed at getting people out of their houses to visit the theatre in groups is a good example. Direct links between cultural activities and outcomes are rarer but not unknown. The summer Splash programme run by the Youth Justice Board was shown to cut crime when it was running. A less successful but in its own way interesting scheme was the New Deal special strand for musicians. Culture can also strengthen the self-confidence of groups: disabled theatre is a good example (exemplified by the New Breed theatre); the whole panoply of gay culture; the 7:84 Theatre Company reviving an assertive radical Scottish ethos back in the 1970s.

Culture does seem to be an important way of engaging people – bringing them in and altering the psychology of communities – even if it has less of a role to play in subsequently transforming their lives, which depends more on prosaic questions of skill, connections and capability.

7. Social cohesion

The sixth and related goal has been to increase social cohesion – how much people link together. Recent research has confirmed the close relationship

between culture and human community. William McNeil for example has claimed that dancing and singing were at the very origins of human civilisation; work on brain patterns have shown how people literally become synchronised through listening to music or making it together, and are transformed by the experience. Robert Putnam's work on social capital emphasised the role of choirs as a good proxy for trust and big shared events – whether television moments like a football competition or the Queen Mother's funeral – undoubtedly affect the character of community feeling.

Work in Australia by Deirdre Williams showed that involvement in community arts had a number of evident spin off effects on people's confidence and the extent of their networks of support. Shared involvement in public events that send signals about the community may also strengthen bonds – like North Shields Window on the World, Ulverston Festival Town, The Craigmillar Festival Society, founded in 1964 on an Edinburgh housing estate, or the Easterhouse and Cranhill Arts Projects. Big events which include people from all classes can have a less direct symbolic effect. Carnivals played this role in the middle ages and large-scale productions involving many hundreds of people like *The Ship* in Clydeside undoubtedly have an effect on perceptions of inclusion.

Here again, however, the detail is all important. Cultural activities which involve large numbers of people in doing things together generally do build social capital (Ted Cattle's report on Bradford highlighted music groups as a good example; Grand Union's work in London with very large numbers of refugees is another). But cultural activities that are more exclusive or that involve problematic messages may be less helpful.

Conclusions

It used to be said that as soon as an Englishman opens his mouth half his audience have become enemies. Another commentator wrote that musical taste is the way we find out who to dislike. Culture is not an automatic uniter.

Moreover it is so inherently heterogeneous that it cannot easily be fitted into statistical analysis. It is perhaps not surprising therefore that the evidence base for the contribution of culture to regeneration and community remains very weak. Very few serious evaluations have been done properly assessing the opportunity costs, additionality and so on of cultural spending, but then would it be credible to aggregate together community theatre projects, big buildings, film finance and so on?

The same weakness affects the study of creativity which can never get much beyond anecdote and case studies because the thing being studied is so protean: it is probably impossible to define testable hypotheses.

So we can conclude that a cultural dimension is an essential part of the renewal of a community or a city. It can be the spark that signals that what is happening is not business as usual; it can energise passions and excitement and it can help to forge new identities.

But the detail matters – it is not culture per se but rather particular kinds of cultural activity that make the difference. Strategies can focus on creativity in the round; the cultivation of industries able to market cultural products; social harmony, minority identity or overall identity. But it should not be assumed that the same strategy will work for all of these. Instead far more clarity is needed as to which problems are being solved, why and with what tools. The rather prosaic conclusion, in other words, is that we need to get beyond the aerosol; to disaggregate the facts and the tools; and then to build up a more sophisticated craft knowledge of what works rather than expecting ever to achieve anything like a science.

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