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### **Cuts, Culture and the Labyrinth of Means**

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In post-financial crisis United Kingdom, the Conservative-Liberal coalition government is currently implementing a number of severe cuts to public spending on culture. It is not without precedent in recent history: cultural cuts were carried out by the Conservative government in the 1980s, informed by the market logic of neo-liberalism. However, even the Thatcher government, which became famous for its attacks on the public sector, didn't implement cuts as drastic as those now being carried out. The recent round of cuts has again brought to the fore the dominant market-driven discourse of neo-liberalism, and this time around, arguments regarding the centrality of *value for money* and the primacy of quantitative over qualitative values are so weakly contested that even defenders of culture rely predominantly on economic arguments so as to justify the maintenance of existing levels of funding. It is my contention that a key consequence of the prominence of market discourse in relation to cultural funding is that we get stuck in what the classical sociologist Georg Simmel (1997, p. 250) – more than 100 years ago – termed the *labyrinth of means*. In modern society money is increasingly the equivalent of all values, it is at the intersection of all things, and because everything has a price, the subtle distinctions between the value of things are eroded and qualitative values are by obscured by quantitative values. Money pulls the highest down to the lowest, and because it is a *means* to all the delights in the world, it has become coveted as an *end* in itself. As a consequence, debates about cultural funding are all too often focused on the economic value of culture, and thus, to paraphrase Robert Hewison (1995, p. 313), the debates focus on *value for money* rather than *money for value*. It is the latter that is all too often neglected, needs to be brought to the fore and defended.

The cuts to culture in the UK include a 30 per cent cut to the funding of Arts Council England, an organization which operates 'at arm's length' from the government, and distributes a slice of the money allocated by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport to various organizations, each of which has to apply for such funding. The Arts Council was originally set up after the Second World War, and ever since its inauguration it has wrestled

with the dilemma of encouraging artistic innovation and enabling diverse cultural forms to reach as many people as possible (Alexander, 2007). This struggle to reconcile excellence and popularity is significantly hindered by a cut in funding from £449 million to £349 million per year, as is the operation of hundreds of arts organizations that have lost their funding in the latest rounds of bids (Brown, 2011). As part of reducing the budget for the Department of Culture, Media and Sport by 24 per cent to £2 billion, the UK Film Council was axed. The Film Council had received £15 million per year and funded British filmmaking, experimental and mainstream, with local/regional and global reach. Recently, for example, it invested £1 million in *The King's Speech* (2010), which won four Oscars and generated in excess of £150 million in worldwide takings (in accordance with an economic logic, this success alone, some would suggest, justified the existence of the UK Film Council). Iain Canning, one of the film's producers, has said that it 'wouldn't have been made without the UK Film Council' (Smith 2011). It is not just culture in its restrictive sense – as the arts – that has been affected by the cuts. Broader cultural resources – in the sense of culture as a way of life – have also been severely attacked. For example, an estimated 401 libraries plus 53 mobile libraries in the UK are currently under threat or have recently closed (Public Libraries News, 2011); five BBC World Service language services and radio programming in seven languages have been cut, with an estimated audience loss of 30 million (Douglas, 2011); in England, the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council, which received £13 million (and will now get £3m via the Arts Council) faces closure (Flood, 2010). And in English universities, there is to be a 100% cut in the funding of arts, humanities and social science degrees.

A recent interview with the Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron revealed his commitment to making a slimmed down 'social' spending programme a permanent state of affairs. Regarding the restoration of spending after deficit reduction, he argued 'I think that's the wrong approach. Let's do this in a way that's sustainable. We're going to have to change the way we work. How can we do things differently and better to give the value for money?' (Hutton, R., and Donaldson, K. 2011) The concept of value for money features with great frequency in debates on cultural funding together with other similar vocabulary. The consequence is the continued infiltration of market discourse in the cultural field. Nowhere has the value for money discourse in relation to cultural funding been articulated as forthrightly as in the argument promulgated by the prominent think tank the Institute for

Economic Affairs (IEA). The IEA defines its mission as being 'to improve understanding of the fundamental institutions of a free society by analyzing and expounding the role of markets in solving economic and social problems' (Institute of Economic Affairs, 2011a). It has had a tremendous influence on the policy of successive governments and has for many years been calling for the abolition of state support for the arts. Its current director Mark Littlewood sums up the think tank's position on arts funding with a pithy statement: 'Popular arts don't need subsidies. Unpopular arts don't deserve subsidies' (Institute of Economic Affairs, 2011b). Contained within this statement is the philosophy of the IEA on culture in a nutshell. The IEA argues that people should only contribute to cultural funding voluntarily, through buying a product or by means of philanthropy. They are resolutely opposed to 'arm's length' style institutions that receive government funding. These 'quangos', the IEA suggest, impose their elitist or minority tastes on the rest of us. They argue that it is wrong to compel the majority of tax-payers to fund elitist or esoteric cultural events that are enjoyed by a minority. The public, they argue, should vote with their feet, and cultural forms that do not survive are simply those that aren't popular enough and don't deserve to survive (Sawers, 1993; Institute of Economic Affairs, 2011b).

The IEA's position has much in common with Conservative government's approach to cultural funding over the years. For example, in 1979, Arts Minister Norman St John-Stevas proclaimed that government policy had 'decisively tilted away from the expansion of the public to the enlargement of the private sector' (Hewison, 1995, p. 251); in 1987, the Minister for the Arts, Richard Luce argued that 'there is no argument that enables us to claim that the arts are sacrosanct and should be insulated from the real world ... There are too many in the arts world who have yet to be weaned from the welfare state mentality – the attitude that taxpayers owe them a living' (Hewison, 1995, p. 259). Such thinking was bolstered by the 1983 National Audit Act which gave the Auditor General the power to evaluate public bodies in terms of their economy, efficiency and effectiveness; this meant the introduction of performance indicators and targets; in 2010, David Cameron proposed a 'leaner and meaner' arts funding and *value for money*; Jeremy Hunt, the current culture Minister has proclaimed that 2011 will be the 'year of corporate philanthropy' (Higgins, 2010). He has proposed an £80m match-funding scheme to encourage private giving to cultural organizations. This market discourse has dominated debates about cultural funding

and over the years it has even permeated the language of arts organizations. As the sociologist Victoria Alexander (2007) observes, the reports of major cultural organizations such as the Arts Council now tend to read like business documents. It means that all too often, culture is discussed in quantitative terms and success is measured by the extent to which cultural creators generate economic capital. To view culture in these terms is to get stuck in the *labyrinth of means*. In the many interactions that characterize our lives, money provides a direct basis for mutual understanding: it is unambiguous, strips things of their colouration and reduces transactions to their simplest form. I can own shares in a company or buy a house without any need for personal contact with my fellow shareholders or the previous owners of the property. The transactions I undertake are swift, unambiguous and lacking in any personal colouration. However, to reduce matters cultural to this logic means, as Simmel (1997, pp. 50-1) argued, 'getting stuck in the labyrinth of means and thereby forgetting the ultimate goal'. The goal of cultural funding is to provide money for *value*.

I'd suggest that this market discourse is based on a *quixotic misreading* of culture. Miguel de Cervantes' Don Quixote is a figure out of synch with the world. Rather than recognizing the banal realities that surround him, he reads them through the distorting lenses of chivalric literature. When Don Quixote arrived at an inn, he was convinced that he was in the grounds of a famous castle. He believed that the pollack he ate was trout, 'the black bread of the whitest flour, the whores ladies and the innkeeper the warden of the castle' (Cervantes, 1950, p. 40). The market-driven discourse of the IEA and the British government in relation to culture is based on a similarly quixotic misreading. Instead of seeing the stark reality – that culture is in danger as a result of a marketization of cultural creation that does not accord with market logic – the IEA and the British government see a world of culture that somehow works in perfect tandem with market principles. The 'Greats', if they truly are 'Great', will triumph because their 'Greatness' will make their work popular and will thus attract patronage. The contention is that the 'free hand' of the market will take over the role hitherto played by state-funded organizations and will in fact be more efficient in doing so. Where is the evidence that this will work? The IEA argues that the arts flourished for centuries in the UK before state funding was introduced. The Arts Council was not set up until after the Second World War, and before that many of the 'Greats' earned their living directly by means of popular performances and various forms of private

patronage. This, the IEA asserts, was at a time when the spending power of the arts-going public was a fraction of what it is today (Sawers, 1993, p. 36). In order to embolden their argument, they draw attention to composers from the past such as Mozart. Such musicians 'enjoyed popular acclaim ...The market supported them; it could support their equivalents today' (Sawers, 1993, p. 34-5). This disregards much of the evidence concerning Mozart's life; as Norbert Elias (1993) found, Mozart was a dependent outsider in an economy dominated by the court aristocracy; he died with the sense that his social existence was a failure. Anyway, it would be futile to draw up a list of cultural creators who succeeded in the market and those who died in abject poverty. There are plenty that would fit in to both categories and many striking examples of those who – like the Renaissance sculptor Benvenuto Cellini – fell in and out of favour with capricious patrons with the threat of violence overhanging their lives . What is more important is to look to the future and to eliminate – as much as is humanly possible – the kind of poverty that left the likes of Rembrandt unable to pay for his own funeral. The vague hope that the market will provide or the assertion that the cultural creator has in the past endured in precarious conditions is no reason to unduly prolong such a state of affairs. And as regards the cultural objects created in the twenty-first century, the consequence of leaving things to the market is what Zygmunt Bauman (2005; 2010) terms *liquid culture*, a culture in which transience is valued over duration and cultural creations like any other commodities make the swift journey from newness to obsolescence. According to Bauman, *liquid culture* is already well and truly established.

The IEA and the British government are wrong to believe in the sublimity of the market. However, they may well have a point when they argue that bureaucracies stifle ideas, even if such bureaucracies are set up at 'arm's length' from the government. Indeed, a defence of funding that defends state resources arguably perpetuates a body of administration that is counter-productive to artistic and cultural production; after all, administration adheres to a logic that is completely inimical to creativity. How can resources that foster creativity be justly distributed by a bureaucratic organization? Is it not the case that such organizations enable cultural elites to maintain their dominance of the field, precisely because these elites are best situated – in terms of resources and social capital – to apply for funding? Do they succeed at the expense of emergent groups that have less

experience in filling out funding forms and making the right noises? Yes, in many instances they do. These questions highlight an antinomy between culture and administration, one that was explored by the Frankfurt School scholar Theodor Adorno (1991) several decades ago. It is illuminating to return to his key thesis. He argued that culture sits uneasily alongside administration. If culture is administered, it is planned by 'specialists' whose aptitude in technical matters of administration is not often matched by a competence in matters cultural. Such bureaucrats can know little of culture if they are fulfilling the obligations of their office, obligations that have nothing to do with creativity. Similarly, culture is at odds with administration. Creativity does not operate in accordance with the formal logic that governs bureaucratic office. Culture will only suffer if it is planned, organized and forced to adhere to goals that are beyond its remit. Administration damages culture by making it conform to a logic that is extrinsic to its purposes, and an assessment of the quality or more broadly, the aesthetic value, of a cultural object, is beyond the remit of administration. Bureaucracies regulate abstractly; they operate in accordance with calculable rules. These calculable rules, as the classical sociologist Max Weber (1978, p. 975) observed, are highly efficient, but operate 'without regards for persons'. It is precisely this lack of regard for persons, this blindness to personal qualities, and this indifference to non-quantifiable values that sets administration at odds with culture. But does this mean we should abandon the administration of culture and leave it to the market? I think not. As Adorno suggested, culture and administration have an uneasy time together, but culture benefits from the relationship. Left alone, it will languish, and 'everything cultural threatens not only to lose its possibility of effect, but its very existence as well' (Adorno, 1991, p. 108). Esoteric and fragile cultural forms are able to survive if they are protected by administration; culture creators are able to make a living as a result of funding that is administered; administrations enable the work of art to have contact with society. Hope lies in there being those within administration 'whose authority really is founded upon the authority of the thing itself ... [This] opens a perspective for the protection of cultural matters from the realm of control by the market, which today unhesitatingly mutilates culture' (Adorno, 1991, p. 129). The appointment or election to funding bodies of those who have the knowledge to arbitrate in matters cultural can offer a more accountable, albeit imperfect, alternative to the arbitrariness of relying on commercial patronage, which comes with its own strings and attachments and lacks accountability. A further argument for the

defence of cultural funding bodies can be found in the work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. According to Bourdieu (1987; 1993; 1996; 2003), those working within the cultural field, particularly those in the relatively autonomous sub-field of artistic production, have gradually sought to rid themselves of the demands of patronage and in more recent years the rule of money and interest. The relative autonomy of the cultural field has taken centuries to evolve and its defence is part of a wider defence of social entitlements which are, according to Bourdieu (1998, p. 60) 'among the highest achievements of civilization – achievements that ought to be universalized, extended to the whole planet'. These achievements which include the right to education, housing and healthcare, are currently threatened by a discourse that reduces life to a series of economic transactions. Bourdieu (2003) argues that the cultural field has started a process of involution, a regression from the production of the cultural work to the production of the product; the commercial imperative threatens cultural production and circulation at every stage. The reduction of artistic works to commercial products must be fiercely resisted and the gains that have been made by the fields of cultural production need to be defended. The defence of funding bodies that enable cultural creation as an end in itself is vitally important.

In conclusion, it is my contention that a defence of cultural funding is a necessary part of a broader defence against the dominance of a market discourse that leaves us stuck in the *labyrinth of means*. Pressure to maintain cultural funding needs to be exerted at a national level where many of the existing funding mechanisms operate, but the national focus needs to be informed and inspired by a global imagination and developed by means of collaboration with other intellectuals and cultural practitioners around the world. Arguments regarding cultural funding need to be steered away from the *labyrinth of means* and the quixotic belief in the sublimity of the market. An interview in the 1990s with the Finnish film director Aki Kaurismaki highlights the precariousness of the situation of the independent artist, in his case, the auteur. Asked from whence he received funding for his films, he replied 'from a Chinese bookie'. Asked whether the bookie was rich, he replied 'not any more' (Aki Kaurismaki - Interview 1990). Of course, Kaurismaki's comments were not entirely serious, but they do highlight the difficulties facing cultural creators who operate without the full force of a media conglomerate to back them up. In actual fact, Kaurismaki has received substantial sums (by art house standards) from the Finnish Film Foundation

with which to fund some of his films. In an era that foregrounds value for money, this government-funded organization refreshingly admits in a report published on its website that the Finnish film industry makes little impact on the economy, even though it is very well funded (Alanen, 2008). However, crucially, it has a considerable *cultural* impact. It is precisely this attitude – which places at the fore money for *value* – that needs to be celebrated and promulgated. It is this attitude, this conviction which prompted the entire theatre to spontaneously join in with *Va' pensiero* at a recent performance of Verdi's *Nabucco*, conducted by Riccardo Muti, in protest at the culture cuts in Italy.

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