Looking for cultural value: Critiques of Australian cultural policy

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Abstract This paper brings together critiques of contemporary Australian cultural policy from three sources: academic research, arts leaders and public intellectuals. It discusses the discursive shift in cultural policy towards an instrumentalist framework, and reviews academic research on this shift and its implications. It then looks at critiques of policy shifts by public intellectuals and leaders within the arts sector to identify parallels and persistent themes across academic scholarship and public thinking on cultural policy. In particular, it identifies and examines the theme of absence of a place for cultural value and production in policy-making and looks at arguments that call for a reinstatement of policy driven by cultural value.

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Introduction

One of Australia’s leading arts luminaries – the singer, songwriter, cabaret artist, cultural commentator and festival director Robyn Archer – left Australia in 2005 for a position as artistic director at the Liverpool European Capital of Culture year of celebrations in 2008, a position from which she has subsequently resigned. Before she left Australia, Archer lamented the state of cultural policy and arts practice in Australia. She described a scenario in which the arts are losing a sense of their distinctive purpose and, as a result: “right now, it’s a tough time for art” (Archer 2005: 71).
6). Decreasing government subsidy and a lack of appreciation for the intrinsic value of the arts, she argued, have created a climate in which entertainment flourishes while art withers.

This sentiment may not have been the cause of Archer’s departure for Britain, because similar criticism has been focused on British cultural policy. Josie Appleton (2004: 1, 4), assistant editor of Spiked.com, wrote that the policy approach dominating British cultural policy “represents the end of cultural policy as we have understood it. The pursuit of aesthetic or historical understanding, of attempting to distinguish good paintings from bad or correct interpretations from false ones, is deemed impossible ... Flick through a New Labour cultural policy document, and it becomes clear that you could substitute “museums” and “art” for “shops” and “stereos” and the words would make as much sense.”

This article traces the recent debate over the issue of cultural value in relation to cultural policy. It notes that cultural value has become increasingly important in critiques of the success of cultural policies, and investigates what is meant by cultural value in an era in which both policy makers and academics have eschewed belief in a singular, essentialist notion of the public good.

**Contemporary cultural policy in Australia and Britain**

From the 1980s to the present decade, government policy in Britain and Australia has experienced a shift from the ideology of public support for “the arts” as a public good, to that of government funding for and regulation of the “cultural industries” and more lately the “creative industries”, on the condition that they provide tangible economic or social benefits. This shift broadens the scope of policy: the British Department for Culture, Media and Sport defines the creative industries as including “advertising, architecture, the art and antiques market, crafts, design, designer fashion, film and video, interactive leisure software, music, the performing arts, publishing, software and computer games, television and radio” (DCMS 2006a). The “creative industries” form a category in competition with and comparable to other industries. This framework for policy provides financial or regulatory support for cultural organisations and projects according to the criterion that they can be considered a sound financial or social investment, whether by having the potential to become financially self-supporting or by providing sufficient benefits to the economy or society as a whole (such as through cultural tourism or social therapeutic benefits) to justify the investment of public or private sponsorship (Jeffcutt, Pick and Protherough 2000).

The creative industries framework, together with what has been described as “cultural diversity policy” (Appleton 2004) which focuses on the social benefits derived from cultural funding, shape the discourse around the cultural policies of the British and Australian governments (DCMS 2006a, 2006b; DCA 1994). In both the cultural industries and cultural diversity approaches, the subjects of funding are attributed an instrumentalist purpose, whether social or economic. As Craik, McAllister and Davis (2003: 21) describe, such policies cast culture in the “simultaneous roles of leader, catalyst and cement” with the capacity to enhance economic and social wealth. This instrumentalist framework is often contrasted to a model of public funding that previously dominated Australian and British cultural policies, in which the arts were seen as public goods which the state was consequently obliged to support.

In Britain and Australia, the instrumentalist framework for cultural policy is widely attributed to the Labour/Labor governments of the 1990s led, respectively, by Tony Blair and Paul Keating. In Blair’s 1998 *A New Cultural Framework* the “creative industries” referred to those activities “that have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the general exploitation of intellectual property” (Dept of Culture, Media & Sport 1998). On its 2006 “Creative Industries” website, the British Department of Culture, Media and Sport notes that the creative industries accounted for 8.2 per cent of gross value added in 2001 and
grew by an average of 8 per cent per annum between 1997 and 2001. It notes that creative exports equalled about 4.2 per cent of all goods and services exported in 2001 and grew at around 15 per cent per annum between 1997 and 2001 (2006a). Garnham, writing about the semantic and ideological shift in Britain from the term cultural industries to creative industries, notes that what underpins the notion of creative industries is the belief that these are ‘the key new growth sector of the economy, both nationally and globally, and thus, against a background of manufacturing sector decline, they are the source of future employment growth and export earnings’ (2005: 25). Certainly this belief underpins the promotion of cultural policies within Australia and Britain.

Further on, we briefly discuss the debate over the use of the terms “cultural” and “creative” industries to describe the activities to which cultural policy relates, but otherwise the article uses the term “cultural industries” to describe the framework around cultural policy as this is the term commonly used in Australian policy-making. In Australia, the industries approach was first articulated in the Keating Government’s 1994 policy statement, Creative Nation, which sought to stimulate cultural activities, particularly by integrating communications technology into them, to promote their independence and competitiveness with other industries and with international cultural products and services. As Throsby (2006: 14) describes, Creative Nation “saw itself unapologetically as being not only a cultural policy, but also an economic policy”: “Culture creates wealth. Broadly defined, our cultural industries generate 13 billion dollars a year. Culture employs. Around 336 000 Australians are employed in culture-related industries. Culture adds value, it makes an essential contribution to innovation, marketing and design. It is a badge of our industry” (DCA 1994: 7). While it gave a new and broader definition to culture, Creative Nation nonetheless maintained a commitment to the arts as a policy focus and increased funding to the Australia Council for the Arts as the federal arts funding agency (DCA 1994: 13).

The alacrity with which the notion of cultural industries was adopted in Australia must seem ironic to those who used the term in the 1980s. Donald Horne, for instance, who chaired the Australia Council from 1985 to 1990, produced a significant amount of public relations material emphasising how crucial cultural activities were to Australia’s transforming economy. Not only were they economically valuable activities on their own, but they provided a value-adding service to manufacturing industries (for example furniture design) and, by improving the intellectual and creative satisfaction to citizens, helped to create a productive workforce. In 1997, Horne stated that this argument was driven more by a need to persuade governments of the value of funding cultural activities, than by a belief in the framework itself (Johanson 2000).

The receptiveness of government to the notion of cultural industries is itself very important, and in the Australia of the late 1980s governments were particularly receptive to ideas that offered economic improvement because the economy was seen to be in crisis. Treasurer Paul Keating (who later became Prime Minister, 1991–1996) is often remembered for his 1986 warning that Australia should face economic reform or risk becoming a “banana republic” (Kelly 1992: 14). In the 1980s the importance of the protective role of the state in industry policy declined and was increasingly replaced with an ethos of economic and cultural independence and responsiveness to international markets (Kelly 1994). By the mid-1980s, the Federal Government was frustrated by resistance to these changes. Minister for Industry, John Button, lamented the lack of capable managers in Australian business, expressed frustration with the inadequacy of innovation in manufacturing and advocated change in the culture of production. The creative industries notion was embraced because it held out a promise to add value to Australian exports and to encourage a creative culture (Johanson 2000).

The cultural industries approach to policy thus offered to stimulate the key industries of a post-industrial age. It also offered to provide the potential for success in manufacturing industries, by supplying means by which value could be added to export
goods, providing widespread education, research and community involvement beyond the formal systems in which these traditionally took place.

Changes in cultural policy research

As cultural policy grew as an area of concern in national governance, so did academic research on such policy. In the 1990s, much of this research promoted the value of the industries approach. The policy focus on the cultural industries was seen as a focus to which academic research could contribute (Cunningham 1994; Bennett 1993; Craik 1995). Furthermore, the policy approach itself was seen to generate a democratic understanding of culture by allowing the market to determine the cultural activities in which it would take part; secure government and public support for culture and bestow political power upon cultural creators; and represent a worthwhile national investment as the highly exportable “cultural industries” draw in profits (Bennett & Carter 2001; Smiers 2003; Pratt 2005; Stanbridge 2004; Roodhouse 1997).

More recently, however, academic research has become more critical. The special issues of the International Journal of Cultural Policy (2005) and Media Information Australia (2004) work “within the logic” of the creative industries framework in order to “outline problems and issues emerging from their application and theorisation” (MIA 2004: 6). Pratt, like Jeffcutt, Pick and Protherough (2000), argues that a “one size fits all” cultural industries strategy may be ineffective and that “cultural industries may differ from other industries” (2005: 35). Craik, McAllister and Davis identify tensions for national cultural policy under the cultural industries framework as it is expected to be both facilitator and architect of cultural projects. The outcome of the framework, they argue, is that “although cultural participation is widespread, most energy is channelled into activities such as cinema, picnicking and fetes” while those “educative” cultural forms historically promoted by the government, such as theatre, music and galleries, remain “distinctly unpopular with the majority” (2003: 29).

While some work “inside the logic” of the creative industries framework, others work outside it, by calling for political interrogation of the concepts and terms that underpin it. Garnham argues that use of the term creative industries “serves as a slogan, as a shorthand reference to, and thus mobilises unreflectively, a range of supporting theoretical and political positions … It disguises the very real contradictions and empirical weaknesses of the theoretical analyses it mobilises, and by doing so helps to mobilise a very disparate and often potentially antagonistic coalition of interests around a given policy thrust” (Garnham 2005: 16). Pratt (2004) seeks to retain use of the term ‘cultural industries’ in order to maintain a policy focus driven by the distinctive qualities of cultural production rather than consumption. Wimmer, like Garnham, is keen to deconstruct cultural policy to find its political centre, when he calls for a more politically engaged reading of cultural policy as a means of acknowledging the “manifold dimensions of cultural policy” (2004).

Recently, academic researchers have begun to be critical of a perceived absence of place for critical assessment of cultural value within cultural policy. Alan Stanbridge argues that the polarisation of the debate over cultural policy between the instrumentalist approach and the traditional “lofty” approach to policy allows no place for such assessment, as instrumentalism relegates such responsibility to the market and the “lofty” approach resorts to “pre-coded, essentialist parameters of the discourse of excellence” (2002: 124). Caust (2005), drawing from Belfiore, Holden and Throsby, argues that an inability to address the issue of cultural value in policy-making is inevitable when policy is driven by instrumental outcomes.

Throsby and Holden both call for a reinstatement of cultural value to determine cultural policy. Throsby suggests that to avoid the “crisis of value” stemming from postmodernism in cultural theory, we might deconstruct the notion of cultural value into its constituent parts (aesthetic, spiritual, social, historical, symbolic and authenticity) as
a means of articulating its “multi-dimensional nature” (2001: 29, 31). Holden uses the notion of cultural value as a call to reshape the way public funding for culture is argued and understood. Cultural value encompasses the range of values – intrinsic, instrumental and institutional – which are expressed through cultural practice. In his definition of cultural value, Holden emphasises those “affective elements” of cultural experience which promote a “strong” culture, that is, one which is “confident in its own worth instead of a weak culture dedicated to the production of ancillary benefits” (2004: 10). In this way, Holden argues, cultural value asserts the necessity of a “new concordat between funders, funded and the public” – a consensus that helps to build a notion of culture as “an integral and essential part of a civil society” (2004: 11). We note that the discourses around cultural industries have tended to efface a holistic evaluation of cultural value while stressing the necessity for the cultural sector to justify its consumption of public money. We further note the connecting thread between the arts leaders and practitioners considered here is that they echo Holden’s call for an increased emphasis on cultural value in policy deliberations.

Related to the absence of cultural value in policy is a perceived lack of concern with cultural production in favour of consumption. Again, scholars make this a criticism of both cultural policy and scholarship on cultural policy. Stanbridge argues that museum policies which conceive of the museum-goer as an active participant in the process of meaning-making may represent “a fundamental reneging of responsibility on the part of the institution” (2004: 10). Pratt argues that “the analytical pendulum has swung too far in prioritising consumption in analyses of the cultural economy” (2004: 1), and that cultural governance should involve the acceptance of responsibility for shaping the market (2005). Born makes the point that cultural studies have long been dominated by a fascination with the theorisation of consumption, and as a result, evaluative studies of artists and their work have been noticeably absent (Born 1995, 1993, 2000). Something of the same emphases are apparent in the cultural policy sector where policy makers spruik a generally positive message about the potential of the cultural industries to bring new and expanded consumers to the cultural table (Cunningham 2006). Indeed this emphasis on cultural consumption has been the hallmark of much contemporary cultural policy in Australia and the UK and, as a strategy, can be seen to buy into “a romanticization of consumption and sovereign audiencehood” (Born 2000). Born (2000: 412) points to “a kind of disciplinary autism” in research into cultural consumption – specifically television audiences – characterised by reluctance to engage with the issue of production.

The approaches to production that these scholars propose is invariably more interdependent with consumption than those of social sciences traditionally (such as the Frankfurt School for instance), as they seek to rework the polarised categories of consumption and production into a more complex network of mutual influence and indeed creation. Without an acknowledgement of the complex relationship between consumption and production, cultural policy misses the mark. Jeffcutt, Protherough and Pick (2004: 5) argue that the notion that cultural industries produce clearly defined goods or services is misleading, because they actually produce potential experiences and, moreover, the commercial success of the goods and services is notoriously difficult to predict.

So what has been the effect of instrumentalism on the activities to which cultural policy relates? Caust (2003, 2004) argues that the arts have been the beneficiary of various aspects of the cultural industries model – particularly in terms of drawing attention to the value of cultural exports and the general public recognition of the income-generating capacities of culture. However, she points out, there are also palpable disadvantages, including the disincentive for artists to take creative risks in the light of the imperative to achieve market-driven objectives to facilitate economic growth rather than creative outcomes for their own sake (2003). This has resulted in the gradual collapse of the term “art” into the broader generic term “culture”; a rhetorical shift which Caust sees as problematic as it has been accompanied by not only a shift away from
understanding the “unique qualities” of arts practice, but also an increasing propensity to view the arts as a peripheral cultural activity (Caust 2004: 8).

Returning the focus of policy to production rather than consumption also calls for attention to producers rather than audiences and consumers. Caust argues that instrumentalist policies displace producers in policy-making when she notes the shift in Australia away from having arts experts and specialists in key leadership roles to the appointment of people from the business and corporate sector to leadership positions within arts and culture (2003; 2004). Furthermore, arts funding agencies have deconstructed their autonomous artform-specific funding mechanisms and replaced these with new funding and assessment arrangements which emphasise the business and investment responsibilities of grant recipients (Caust 2003). Born, in her ethnographic studies of contemporary cultural practices, argues that what is missing from policy deliberations is a consideration of the creator. Such consideration has been effectively erased as a result of the ‘rigid inhibitions’ of poststructuralist deconstructions of authorship. Born calls for a renewed interest in talking to the author about “his/her role, and his/her potential political engagement” (Born 2000: 274).

Other sectors that traditionally received public funding are also receiving more critical analysis as the goals behind government policies towards them change. In her analysis of the impact of new management strategies in the public sector, Townley identifies evidence of “competing and inconsistent logics brought about by a clash of value spheres between the cultural and the economic” (Townley 2002: 175). Townley’s conclusion, that the introduction of business planning and performance measures into the public sector produced “competing legitimacies” and a clash of values, is of relevance to the arts sector, which is also experiencing this “clash of values” between culture and industry. Townley’s description of the public sphere resembles Garnham’s argument that there is a clash between the market imperative to attract the widest range of consumers to cultural activities and the artistic imperative to achieve “excellence”: “it has become known in popular journalistic parlance as ‘dumbing down’” (Garnham 2005: 28).

Australia: a place where size really does matter

In her 2005 essay The Myth of the Mainstream, Archer expresses several concerns about the directions of current cultural policies. In particular, she argues that the principal approach of arts policies is a functionalist one that emphasises product over process and quantity over quality. Like Pratt, she argues arts policies need to reconsider the nature of creative endeavour and to acknowledge its fundamental difference to the “creative” outcomes of other industries. Artists, she points out, may insist that the end result of their creative endeavours – the product – is actually merely “the detritus of the creative process” (2005: 32). While the demands of a business-oriented paradigm might see that creativity can be situated within, and may be defined by, the determinations of the market place, artists, on the other hand, often create without an audience in mind (Archer 2005: 32). In this sense, Archer is echoing Guillet de Monthoux who goes further to outline the ways in which art-making differs from the principles usually associated with manufacturing, arguing that art work, unlike other products, cannot be circumscribed by “the rational planning for attaining preconceived goals as economically and effectively as possible” (Guillet de Monthoux 2004: 52).

The arts industry paradigm, argues Archer, has also seen the diminishment of the small-to-medium arts sector with a concomitant growth in the support for large-scale projects and organisations. The effect of recent cultural policies that have increased funding to the performing arts has been a reduction in the allocation to the small-to-medium and independent sector in order to bolster the allocation of resources to the large organisations (2005: 31). This has meant that: “Value is placed on quantity, not quality, on sheer scale rather than pure essence. The tiny gem is unloved. Success in
...is measured by box-office takings, bums on seats... The dilemma we face is that currently in Australia the lion’s share of arts subsidy is... going to the spectacular... In Australian culture right now, size definitely matters” (2005: 40).

The second strand of policy critique comes from Rodney Hall in his discussion paper *Give Wings to the Arts: A New Model for Arts Funding* (2005), written for the Australian Labor Party’s shadow arts ministry. Hall expresses alarm at the way in which the cultural industries framework has been accompanied by an increasing bureaucratisation of the arts which has in turn led to “a huge unknowable proportion of the public funding provided end[ing] up in the pockets of arts bureaucrats rather than artists” (2005: 2). In particular, Hall cites the comparatively high salaries for arts managers and executives (some CEOs in the arts earn $200,000 plus), while the income of most practising artists is approximately $25,000 per annum (Strickland 2005). Like Archer, Hall warns that the diminishment of the small to medium arts sector has seen a corresponding decline in employment opportunities for artists, and at the same time, larger and established arts organisations are “carrying a superstructure that obliges them to offer safer...box office fare to support their costs” (Hall 2005: 3).

Hall and Archer share a view that an arts policy crisis in Australia is looming. Hall is unequivocally dismissive of the notion of the cultural industries, and their various discursive formations, in prompting the current policy crisis:

> **Starting from the premise that the sciences and the arts are the two great fields of enquiry of the humanist tradition for investigating and understanding ourselves and the universe around us, the arts do not need justification as industries...Many of the arts do not yield measurable or practical outcomes when subjected to the industrial model of short term performance indicators. It is better to state their value as cultural, right up front, much as we believe in funding education as education.**

(Hall 2005: 8)

Should these arguments risk promoting the kind of absolutism that postmodernist cultural theories have sought to destabilise, David Throsby recommends we privilege the role of cultural policy in contributing to a broader national policy agenda.

**Public Intellectuals on cultural policy**

Earlier in this paper, we referred to David Throsby’s research on cultural value. Here, we discuss his platform paper *Does Australia Need a Cultural Policy?* as the work of a public intellectual shaping public, rather than academic, debate. Born provides a useful definition of the role of the public intellectual in her discussion of the allied field of media production where she identifies “media intellectuals” who provoke questions about “when the power of cultural production is used responsibly, creatively, inventively in given conditions” (2000: 406).

Throsby summarises the characteristics of contemporary cultural policy since the advent of *Creative Nation*. He states that while Australian society is “economically wealthy” it is also “culturally impoverished” and this is evidenced by the declining resources for many cultural organisations and lack of employment for creative artists (2006, 44-45). While there is a broad bi-partisan acceptance of the idea that the Federal Government has a duty to fund the arts, the Coalition Government, under Prime Minister John Howard, has shown particular preferences and inclinations (2006: 10). Throsby cites the attitude of the government towards public broadcasting and argues that its ambivalence towards the ABC demonstrates an “ideological distaste for public-sector involvement in any area they see as being better left to private enterprise” (2006: 10). Throsby concludes that “the Coalition under John Howard has shown itself to be quite uncomfortable with the critical and perhaps
confrontational stance on sensitive issues that artists and cultural organisations can take” (2006: 10). Further, while the government pledges support for the arts, it is “reluctant to provide the levels of funding that could catalyse a new renaissance in the production and consumption of the arts across Australia” (2006: 46).

Throsby calls for what he calls a “bottom-up” approach to cultural policy development in which “grass-roots individuals, communities and other groups might coalesce around particular issues to…open up debate on particular elements in the cultural policy mosaic” (2006: 48). Furthermore, the “value” that policy should attribute to culture should be shaped not simply by strictly cultural criteria – although such criteria are crucial – but by the role of the arts and culture in a variety of policy issues, such as economic, social and foreign policy (Throsby 2006: 32-44).

The critique of the status quo offered by Throsby’s paper produced some significantly antipathetic responses in the media. Leading right-wing columnists for the Australian newspaper, for example, such as Janet Albrechtson, Christopher Pearson and Imre Salusinszky, all wrote stinging critiques of Throsby’s argument. Albrechtson, in particular, took Throsby to task for arguing that there should be increased levels of government subsidy to the arts (Albrechtson 2006: 10). She reaffirmed the significance of the market as the determiner of cultural value by arguing that arts companies are failing because they are “snuggled up in their taxpayer-funded cocoons, sheltered from the normal forces of creative competition and as such are producing second-rate, self-indulgent gunk” (2006: 10).

Battersby argues that the Australia Council has been subjected to external pressure to justify its raison d’être within the terms set out by economic rationalist thinking. She suggests that the new discourses of art as a commodity have led to the Australia Council’s over-emphasis on the commissioning of surveys and research reports and “with redesigning and fine-tuning and polishing their own administrative machinery, as though that might help them arrive at their ultimate destination” (Battersby 2005a). Further, she argues that the “real growth industry in the last 25 years has not been artists, but hangers-on. Add the States and Canberra and the academics to this lot and Australia is feeding more bureaucrats and committees and experts than artists” (Battersby 2005b). Reflecting the views of both Hall and Archer, Battersby claims that discourses around culture and the arts have been dominated by arguments about “usefulness and cost-effectiveness…and an obsession with justification” (Battersby 2005b). The time has come, she urges, to understand the role of artists as being catalysts for change and the role of an arts council is to “find ways to liberate artists and organisations to perform that essential function” (Battersby 2005a). Battersby’s argument here suggests a fundamental re-think for cultural policy in such a way as to deconstruct the current focus on cultural economics and, instead, to strengthen the mechanisms of peer review and arms-length funding and to revitalise the role of arts advocacy (Battersby 2005a, 2005b).

As discussed above, Stanbridge’s critique of the cultural industries framework rests on his problematising of its applicability; the problem of the “gap between rhetoric and reality” and the disparity between the discursive formations of cultural theory, and its realisation in cultural policy programs (2004: 2). On the basis of the literature examined here, however, we argue that it is not so much a question of the application of cultural industry theorising, but something more fundamental – a clash of values between the economic and political arguments on one hand, and the cultural one on the other. Hall, Archer and Battersby all articulate a sense of the competing rationales that exist between the need to justify art on economic grounds, and the necessity to see it, on the contrary, on its own terms, for its own sake and for its capacity to build cultural capital.

Conclusion

For its Australian architects, an instrumental approach to cultural policy seemed to present an excellent way to shore up the place of culture in a climate of economic
rationalism. Since the 1980s, this approach has gained increasingly more significance; to most observers, the approach seems appropriate to the principles guiding government policy and spending. The policy objectives of Creative Nation and all its subsequent iterations at state and federal level stress the primary goal of a diverse and vibrant cultural sector. Quite rightly, diversity and vibrancy are seen to be hallmarks of sustainability and longevity.

While academic appraisals have often questioned the success of its application, only recently have they really begun to challenge its political premise. Such critiques highlight the need for researchers to undertake a more thorough analysis not only of the economic and social benefits of the industries approach to cultural policy, but also its cultural ramifications. For those researching cultural policy, its present shape and its future consequences, the observations of Archer, Hall, Battersby and Throsby have much to add to an appreciation of cultural policy's consequences.

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