

# The Arts, Them and Us: creating a more equitable system for subsidised culture

A research symposium hosted by the Institute of Cultural Capital

9.30am – 3.30pm, Tuesday 13 May 2014

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## SYMPOSIUM OVERVIEW AND ABSTRACTS

### Synopsis

“The job of the state, and the Minister for the Arts, was to support and then to stand aside; to respond, but not to impose; and always to offer the best to the most”. (‘Jennie Lee: A Life’, Hollis 1997, pp. 246)

*Rebalancing our Cultural Capital* – a report first published in October 2013 – prompted heated debate concerning the national distribution of arts funding in England, by highlighting a ‘systemic drift of London bias’. The report compares the contemporary state of play in arts funding with the national cultural policy framework created by Labour MP Jennie Lee in her role as first Minister for the Arts in 1965, encouraging reflection on, and re-examination of, establishment and counter-establishment views of the post-war Arts Council.

During ‘The Arts Them and Us’ research symposium, delegates are invited to debate some of the key questions of principle raised by the *Rebalancing our Cultural Capital* (ROCC) report and events that have followed its publication, including a select committee inquiry into the ‘business’ of Arts Council England. Such questions of principle include the challenge of transient political ideologies and their influence on cultural policy; reaching a consensus on cultural value and the extent to which ‘the arts’ can be justified as a rational public investment; and the impact and value of contemporary cultural policy initiatives in levelling the cultural field.

The symposium is also designed as a precursor to an event planned to commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Jennie Lee’s landmark white paper ‘*A Policy for the Arts: The First Steps*’ in 2015.

The symposium will open with a review of the ROCC report and events following its publication from authors **Peter Stark, Christopher Gordon and David Powell**:

‘Publication of the independent ‘RoCC Report’ in October 2013 created public debate extending beyond the arts sector into the mainstream, and has given rise to a Parliamentary Inquiry into how ‘fair’ Arts Council England’s disposition of public funding is (geographically and socially). A major contention is that successive governments and ACE have failed to deliver on their own policy rhetoric about redressing the long-standing funding imbalance that favours London over the English regions - £3.5 billion Lottery ‘new and additional’ money since 1995 notwithstanding. One widely quoted headline figure is that public spending per head on ‘culture’ was nearly fifteen times greater in London than in the rest of England in 2012/13.

The very recently published PLACE Report further shows how the same pattern of advantage to the capital and established arts institutions now also dominates Arts Lottery awards with ‘substitution’ increasingly taking place, despite Lottery Directions from the DCMS emphasising the need to observe ‘new and additional’, community participation and ‘ensuring that all areas of England have access to the money distributed’. PLACE recommends an alternative model, based on a tripartite structure for allocating funds taking account of the social, economic and artistic Lottery Directions imperatives.’

The symposium is then structured around three key themes, including:

## 1 Whose art is it anyway?

During this session, speakers and delegates are invited to debate issues of national cultural value and political ideology. The ‘Rebalancing’ report uses Jennie Lee’s 1965 White Paper *‘A Policy for the Arts: The First Steps’* as its philosophical foundation for an equitable, national arts policy. The authors continue to note various landmark initiatives since then that have helped to shape ‘creative communities throughout the country’. Despite such progress however, the report infers a significant failure with regards to ideological consistency, and the irregular value placed in arts and culture as a ‘national good’. The politicization of the arts that has occurred since the 1980s has served to emphasise their market position, bureaucratic, administrative and managerial functions (Gray, 2000), but not it would seem to embed ‘the idea’ of the arts in national political consciousness. Establishing such a ‘universal’ ideology - that transcends the party political system - is particularly challenging. The very idea of the arts as a ‘national good’ tends only to be represented in policy discourse when speaking of *excellence in the arts* as an international cultural commodity (Boyne, 2006). Despite various iterations of ‘value’ in arts and culture in recent years –social impact and ‘instrumental’ value; excellence and ‘intrinsic’ value - the sector has similarly failed to legitimate itself in the same national context as other subsidised sectors including education and health.

This session will include two keynote provocations:

**Professor Franco Bianchini** will discuss the trajectory of Labour's post-war arts policies, including the role of Jennie Lee, and where we are now regarding a lack of any discerning (left or right of centre) political ideology on the value of culture. Franco’s research on the Labour party and arts policy resonates with the ideological principles behind the ROCC report, including political disengagement and risk concerning 'arms length' decision making; the appropriation of arts and culture in political activism and campaigning; and the seemingly inconsistent value placed in arts and culture, politically, as a means of social representation.

**Dr David Fleming** will reflect upon how the British cultural sector has long been undemocratic in nature and attitude, and the people responsible for this have been encouraged by the lack of policies regarding what public funders expect in return for their funding. David will consider what measures have been taken by some museums – including those in Liverpool – to create ‘the democratic museum’ and its value as a microcosm for cultural policy.

Franco and David will each respond to the following Questions of Principle:

- Can a universal, ideological ‘commitment to culture’ be generated and sustained in Westminster?
- How can arts [or cultural] policies consistently promote its ‘national good’?

## 2 Who pays what piper?

During the second themed session, speakers and delegates are invited to address the problem of ‘the arts’ and public investment. Debates such as those fuelled by the ‘Rebalancing’ report, and Arts Council England’s appropriation of Lottery funds, continually raise questions of principle on who really benefits from subsidised arts and culture, and the extent to which continued state intervention in ‘the arts’ can be justified as a rational public investment. Arts professionals themselves regularly agonise over the ‘middle-class domain’ of the arts (Hutchinson, Arts Professional, 2011), and the sector’s inability to convert the wider public, ‘who think the arts are ‘nice’ but peripheral to their lives’ (Hill, Arts Professional, 2013). In other parts of the cultural sector not immediately associated

with ‘the arts’, there is a reasonable contingent value placed on services such as museums, libraries and archives that have a much more discernible, universal public remit (Usherwood et al, 2005).

Furthermore, less attention is paid to cultural activities that sit outside of ‘the arts’ as they are conventionally understood, have identifiable social benefits and rely on relatively modest investment from the public purse. Policy is irrevocably dictated by the availability of government funds and balanced by ‘accepted’ definitions of public priority. In the case of arts and cultural activities that have anticipated measurable outcomes in relation to health and wellbeing, there are increasing examples of direct commissioning from NHS trusts and central health and social care departments. Such examples create another rationale for public investment in arts and culture, which in itself is routinely open to scrutiny as recent media coverage attests.

This session will include two case study presentations:

**Dr Eleonora Belfiore** will reflect on the predominantly defensive tone of much of the rhetoric of advocacy that has been developed in Britain since the 1980s to ‘make the case’ for the funding of the arts. Her presentation highlights the problems that derive from collapsing the debate around the value of the arts to contemporary society with advocacy, and calls for a new type of policy discourse. The paper calls for an interdisciplinary and collaborative approach to pushing forward the ‘cultural value debate’ that rejects to be enslaved to the needs of policy advocacy and that rather aims to reconnect the spheres of academic research, creative practice, policy-making and public opinion. It concludes with some reflections on the experience of running the Warwick Commission on the Future of Cultural Value and the practical challenges of trying to reframe articulations of cultural value to broader societal aspirations, such as social mobility, equality of opportunities and fairness, and to get the wider public on board.

**Dr Mandy Chivers** will offer reflections from the frontline of mental health care services, including the development of a network of people championing creative approaches to innovation and improvement in healthcare. In developing a range of creative programmes delivered by multi-disciplinary healthcare clinicians in collaboration with Liverpool’s cultural sector, Mandy has stimulated a strategic shift towards recovering wellbeing. These partnerships bring the ‘outside world’ into health care settings and help to establish relationships that open doors for people with mental health problems. The presentation will describe the rationale and impact of this work.

Eleonora and Mandy will each respond to the following Questions of Principle:

- How can a universal, equitable concept of culture (rather than ‘the arts’ AND ‘culture’) be created?
- Can government expenditure on culture ever be truly justified as a rational public investment?

### **3 What would Jennie Lee say now?**

In the interests of enabling a balanced discussion, the final session will draw attention to contemporary cultural policy initiatives that potentially enable and support cultural investment and development beyond the London metropolis. These include most significantly the UK City of Culture (UKCoC) programme, building upon momentum generated by Liverpool’s year as European Capital of Culture in 2008, and other recent cultural policy flagship events including the Cultural Olympiad and symbolic critical acclaim of Danny Boyle’s London 2012 opening ceremony. In November 2013, Hull was announced as the next UK City of Culture 2017. The city had submitted a compelling bid, backed by impressive social media support, which seemed deeply rooted in the native culture of the city, and was defined by the concept of ‘Hullness’. Whilst due caution on investing heavily in the regenerative powers of such a cultural title should be noted (this is communicated emphatically by O’Brien (2013) in the context of a mythological ‘Liverpool model’), the sense of optimism and equality generated for the city by Hull’s UKCoC success should not be undermined, especially as it seems infinitely more ‘us’ than ‘them’. Other relevant strategic examples, as dutifully defended in

Arts Council England's response to the ROCC report, include ACE initiatives such as Creative People and Places and the recently launched Cultural Destinations. Their relative value in addressing the regional discrepancies highlighted by the ROCC' report will be discussed, including whether more can be done in policy and practice to develop and promote an equitable, national cultural ecology that upholds Jennie Lee's philosophy and may in time help to overcome the issues raised in previous sessions.

This session will include presentations from a panel of experts including:

**Dr Beatriz Garcia** will share key findings from the 'London 2012 Cultural Olympiad evaluation', a UK-wide study which interrogated the diverse layers of programming involved in the four-year official cultural programme of the London Games. It focuses on the ways the Cultural Olympiad attempted to 'raise the bar' for cultural programming and to engage different audiences and communities across every UK nation and region. The paper reflects on the achievements as well as the challenges to produce a programme that could be 'owned' well beyond London while at the same time requiring an unequivocal association with the Capital and its hosting of a global mega-event to be perceived as a 'once-in-a-lifetime' opportunity. The paper concludes with a brief discussion about the added-value provided by strong regional involvement to secure a long-term 'Olympic and Paralympic' legacy.

**Aideen McGinley OBE** will describe how the designation of the inaugural UK City of Culture 2013 led to the creation of an enabling environment in Derry-Londonderry through the power of culture to inspire and mobilise a community.

**Andrew Dixon** will discuss frequently asked questions on the award of UK City of Culture 2017 to the city of Hull... How did Hull win UK City of Culture and what has the impact been to date? Will it level the playing field forever or is it a quick Lottery win? Hull has made the most of its limited national investment and has opened a door to serious national conversations. With the Arts Council, BBC, British Council and BFI all heading to Hull to play their part in Hull 2017 are there lessons for other cities? What about Dundee, Leicester and Swansea? He will also talk about Newcastle-Gateshead and the North East where a 10 to 20 year journey moved the region up the national agenda through vision and transformational change. Are the issues the same in other nations? Won't it always be the case that capital cities act as suction pumps? How can every city and place realize its creative potential? What would Jennie Lee think of progress in her home of Fife? Scotland introduced a programme called creative places and awards that shine a light on creativity outside the main cities.

Beatriz, Aideen and Andrew will each respond to the following Questions of Principle:

- What contribution do initiatives such as UK City of Culture make to political ideology and its shaping of national cultural policy?
- Do such initiatives help to justify and substantiate culture as a rational public investment?