



## REVIEW:

*Cultural Capital: The Rise and Fall of Creative Britain* (Robert Hewison: Verso Books, 2014)

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Robert Hewison's latest book provides a cultural historian's perspective on publically funded culture in Britain from 1997 to 2012. What emerges over this two hundred and thirty-four page narrative of a particular period in British cultural history – from Cool Britannia at the end of the twentieth century through to the splendor of the Olympics in 2012 – is a considered reflection on the relationship between publically funded culture and the State. It raises interesting questions for anyone either working with or interested in cultural policy, and in view of Ireland's recently published Culture 2025 policy framework, the book makes for an educational read. It counts the true costs of what happens when government takes a direct interest in arts and culture for the pursuit of other policy aims. Ominously, as Hewison forewarns us, 'the lesson of this is: be careful what you wish for' (p. 3).

Hewison's approach is broadly chronological but each of the eight chapters has a specific theme – for example, the government's agenda for the arts and social inclusion is discussed in chapter three, 'The Many Not Just the Few'. The source material for the book is largely secondary, relying on an analysis of the 'grey literature' of policy reports, government documents, together with academic commentaries and newspaper reporting. At times, the book makes for heavy reading as we are led from one commissioned report or policy document to another. This perhaps reflects Hewison's central concern throughout the book, which is the increasing bureaucratisation of culture in Britain during the years of Tony Blair and New Labour, and the consequent impact upon publically funded culture.

Hewison makes his position clear from the outset: 'this is a book about culture in its traditional sense, meaning the arts and heritage, but it is also, about the political economy of culture' (p. 3). He argues that despite New Labour's rhetoric about a new dawn of national renewal, its moves to integrate arts and culture into the mainstream of government was really a continuation of the neoliberal programme established by the Conservatives under Margaret Thatcher. In 1997, when New Labour began its thirteen years in government, publically funded culture was in a state of neglect. Overall spending on culture was less than 0.5% of government spending. Under New Labour, culture would receive significant investment, as it was mobilized as the means by which Britain would be transformed. Bywords like 'creativity' and 'Creative Britain', personified by Oasis and the YBAs (Young British Artists), became part of New Labour's political lexicon. Throughout the book, Hewison argues that New Labour's approach 'was an act of cultural capitalism on a grand-scale' (p. 7). Cultural policy would become economic policy, and the arm's length principle, upon which arts and culture in Britain had been administered since the formation of the Arts Council of Great Britain in 1945, would be compromised. For Hewison, the new relationship between publically-funded culture and New Labour government was something of a Faustian pact.

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Each chapter of the book begins with a meditation on the value of culture, a quote offered by a cultural leader, a thinker or an artist. The opening quote from a former director of the National Theatre, Richard Eyre, is one of the more striking:

We can justify the subsidised arts on the grounds of cost effectiveness, or as tourist attractions, or as investments, or as commodities that can be marketed, exploited and profited from, but the arts should make their own argument. They are part of our life, our language, our way of seeing; they are a measure of our civilization. The arts tell us truths about ourselves and our feelings and our society that reach parts of us that politics and journalism don't. They entertain, they give pleasure, they give hope, they ravish the senses, and above all they help us fit the disparate pieces of the world together; to try and make form out of chaos. (p. ix)

The other constants throughout the volume are the white elephants and grand-scale public projects that Hewison references throughout as instances of policy failure. In his chapter 'Under New Public Management', the controversy over the Royal Opera House's deficit of £5.5m in 1997-1998 marked for New Labour the transition between the privileged old establishment and a new culture of accountability for the arts and culture more broadly. In 1997, the newly established Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) commissioned Richard Eyre to conduct a review of the state of the Royal Opera House: in his report, Eyre made clear that the failings of the RHO had brought the entire arts funding system into disrepute. He was equally clear that the old ways of managing would have to change; concomitantly, by the end of the twentieth century New Labour had shifted the system for arts and culture funding from arm's length towards direct accountability. However the wresting of control from agencies back towards central government does not escape Hewison's critique, and he cites the Millennium Dome stands as a lasting monument to New Labour vanity: a failed project in which style triumphed over content. It demonstrated the negative result of too much direct government involvement in a pet project. A personal project of Blair's, he later admitted that 'if I knew then, what I know now, about governments trying to run a visitor attraction of this sort, it would probably have been too ambitious to have tried to' (p. 60); indeed perhaps the same might be said retrospectively about New Labour's centralised attitude to funding arts and culture.

In 1998, Chris Smith, the first minister of DCMS, oversaw the enactment of the National Lottery Act. Unlike in Ireland, the National Lottery in the UK provides a source of funding for culture independent of the Arts Council. Whereas Arts Council England grant-in-aid provides core recurrent funding, the National Lottery provides funding for capital projects, training and once-off special projects like the Olympics 2012. Tate Modern was one of twelve Millennium grands projects that received funds of £50 million under the new National Lottery Act. Standing in Tate Modern's Turbine Hall in 2007, Blair gave a speech to the leaders of Britain's cultural establishment inviting them to look back on his ten years in office as a 'golden age of the arts' (p. 7). At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Tate Modern signified a new, confident and creative Britain. Yet, ten years on from when New Labour first entered office, what did their legacy look like?

In 1998, DCMS 'discreetly encouraged' leaders of the culture establishment to seek a meeting with the prime minister to make a case for increased funding (p. 63). Three weeks later it was announced that the Treasury was releasing an extra £290 million to the DCMS over the next three years, beginning in April 1999. The announcement was widely welcomed. By the time Gordon Brown, Blair's successor, left office in 2010 the landscape of culture in Britain had been transformed from its neglected state in 1997. Hewison summarises these achievements: government spending on the arts had nearly doubled, and the removal of entry charges to all national museums and galleries had helped to raise the annual number of visits from 24 million to 40 million. Furthermore there had been substantial help to regional museums. After years of neglect, the nation's cultural infrastructure had been refurbished and extended, from the Great Court of the British Museum to the Sage Gateshead. The National Lottery had

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been turned into an engine of urban regeneration. The film industry was flourishing, theatres were adventurous and their seats full. Labour's 2010 cultural manifesto, 'Creative Britain', boasted that the 'creative industries' contributed 10% of gross domestic product.

This is an impressive picture. Hewison argues, however, that all of this progress came at great cost. The 'previously, semi-autonomous field of culture' became a tool or an instrument for New Labour to achieve their agenda of social inclusion and economic progress. The real legacy of New Labour, he argues, was the rise of managerialism, with its numerous targets and overwhelming requests for quantifiable evidence as the baseline for evaluating culture. New words began to creep into the language of cultural professionals: 'stakeholders', 'measurement', 'participation' and 'cultural diversity', to name a few. Indeed, New Labour even inaugurated a new public watchdog body, QUEST – the Quality, Efficiency and Standards Team – with a mandate to 'look at the process through which DCMS allocates funding to its sponsored bodies in return for specific outputs' (p. 68). The trickle-down of government policy through the 'delivery chain' negatively impacted relationships between DCMS and the agencies it funded, including the Arts Council. While many organisations took their responsibility for social and economic progress seriously, their fundamental missions became subordinated to Labour's social and economic ends. Trust, that fundamental requisite for positive relations, was being eroded.

Hewison uses another white elephant to illustrate this point. The Public in West Bromwich was a multi-purpose venue and art gallery that opened in 2009. In 2001, a quality-of-life study for the Sunday Times named West Bromwich as the second-worst place to live in the United Kingdom. As a de-industrialised city, it was ripe for New Labour regeneration. Hewison sees 'the process by which blighted West Bromwich became home of The Public – the largest community arts building in Europe and the most expensive failure in the Arts Council's Lottery building programme' as illustrating 'the extent to which the demands of government policy can override good sense' (p. 89). According to a subsequent Arts Council investigation, The Public's Lottery assessment panel recommended rejection of its initial proposal on several grounds, including an unsound cost plan and likely overrun. Despite these warnings, the Arts Council went ahead, but in November 2013, The Public closed. Why despite early warnings did the project receive the green light from the Arts Council? The author of a subsequent Arts Council report, Anthony Blackstock, noted that the Council was 'seeking too far to fulfill the social agenda of the Government of the day' (p. 90). Blackstock invoked the failure of The Public to send an important message to government: the Arts Council's charter, he pointed out, 'limits its funding to the creation of arts and their enjoyment;' capital projects like The Public 'may lead to meeting wider social and economic goals but cannot be the primary aim' (p.91). Hewison similarly argues that all of New Labour's demands on arts and culture led to an overvaluing of culture. Whilst arts and cultural programmes and activities are capable of producing social and economic effects, this is not their core purpose, and in Hewison's view it has proved consistently counter-productive to instrumentalise them in this way.

At a midway point in New Labour's reign, in 2003, a change of leadership at the National Theatre 'created an opportunity to demonstrate the sector's new readiness to stand up for itself' (p. 168). The Theatre's new director, Nicolas Hynter, went public in an article for the *Observer*, entitled 'To Hell with Targets'. Throughout the book, Hewison highlights the readiness of the UK's cultural establishment to speak out, question and criticise the actions of the government. However, if New Labour's true legacy was not in fact a 'golden age' for the arts but an era of managerialism and diminished trust between the state and the arts, Hewison takes further aim at their opposition, employing a graphically deadening metaphor for the Conservatives' handling of the arts in a chapter entitled 'The Age of Lead.' Nevertheless, he credits New

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Labour with forcing the Conservative Party to take culture seriously, as evidenced by the Conservatives' official election commitment in 2010, a two-page document entitled *The Future of the Arts* which promised 'coherent and sustained support for the arts, the removal of targets, and the addition of a fourth pillar to the mixed economy of culture through the establishment of endowments' (p. 162).

Once in power, the new Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition reduced the DCMS budget by £400 million in its first Comprehensive Spending Review for 2014/2015. This meant a 30 percent cut for the Arts Council of England, which represented a decline from £449 million in 2010/2011 to £350 million in 2014/2015. In October 2010, Tate's director, Nicholas Serota, condemned the Coalition's policy as a 'blitzkrieg on the arts' (p. 164). Initially, the Coalition's response was both pragmatic and ideological. National Lottery funds, which continued to increase in 2012/2013, would be used to fill the gap and government incentives would stimulate private investment from commercial sponsorship and private philanthropy. As Hewison writes, 'it was counter intuitive... to expect a burst of private and corporate generosity during what was turning out to be the worst recession of modern times' (p. 165).

The Coalition's private investment approach favoured London over the regions and large organisations over smaller ones, and the new infrastructure constructed by New Labour for the public enjoyment of culture was coming under strain. Hewison is convinced that the Coalition's response to the economic crisis failed to create the conditions to support their policy of private investment and charitable support for the arts. In the seven years since Blair's speech at Tate Modern, the golden age had, as Hewison puts it, 'turned to lead' (p. 172). In spite of the ideological differences between Hewison and New Labour's instrumentalist, Conservative-light approach, he credits New Labour with ensuring that, 'whatever the economic prospects in 2015, the future of culture would be an issue in a way it had not been in 1997' (p. 172).

Hewison's book appeared before the British general election in May 2015. When a majority Conservative government was elected, the future of culture in Britain was once more placed in the balance. In writing and publishing this book, Hewison aims to educate voters about 'both experiments' and to inform the 'judgment' that is passed (p. 8). While Hewison declares that the central focus of the book is on 'publically funded culture', it is really about cultural value. His opposition to New Labour policies is pragmatic, as well as ideological. In Hewison's view New Labour instrumentalised arts and culture to serve their agendas of social inclusion and economic growth, which led to the rise of managerialism, target-setting and the demand for hard evidence of culture's social and economic value. This worked against the core purpose of many arts organisations. While New Labour's cultural policies and actions were always intended for 'the many, not just the few' (p. 197), the actual outcome was different. The 2009 Theatre Assessment, for example, demonstrated the 'narrow social foundations on which theatre audience is built' (p. 203), where levels of education and social factors were strong predictors of attendance. 'The problem,' Hewison writes, 'is that these factors were in play right across the cultural sector' (p. 203). Evidently, New Labour's policies did little to change the make-up of audiences. What Hewison credits New Labour with is a loosening-up of barriers between high and low culture, which has precipitated new possibilities for how society as a whole may value culture:

Alongside official culture there exists an informal culture that also expresses the value of society, shapes its identity, and is a source of creativity and pleasure. Culture is by no means the exclusive property of the Arts Council; nor is it limited to what is broadcast on BBC Radio 3. For the great majority of people it comes in the form of recreation, some of it self-generated and non-professional, but chiefly through the market, in forms that need to make themselves as commercially appealing as possible. (p. 220)

He contends that the values and purposes of 'official culture' and 'commercial culture' are in-

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tertwined in the twenty-first century like never before (p. 220). The world is changing at speed, led by technology and the dominance of the marketplace, and everything, including culture, is impacted by such forces. Today's new by-words are 'co-production' and 'collaboration', while we hear less about 'gate-keepers', 'establishment', and 'hierarchies'. Hewison welcomes this new openness, what he terms the 'art of with' (p. 223). The future of culture rests within this shared space, this re-determining of culture, as a public value and not as a government instrument. Hewison's more generous and open ideal of culture finds expression in Danny Boyle's realisation of a 'temporary Utopia' for the opening ceremony of the 2012 Olympic Games:

The thousands of volunteers working alongside the professional artists in the opening ceremony of the 2012 Olympic Games were an example of the synthesis between amateur and professional, between audience participation and performance, between elite and popular art forms. (p. 172)

New Labour's golden age advanced in this direction of shared public space with its expansion of cultural infrastructure, the removal of museum entrance fees and an emphasis on participation. But the problem with all of this for Hewison lay in the narrowness of the demand and the audience for these expanded offerings. Social and economic factors were shown to be the main influencers on participation, and education to be the most important bridge. However he sees digital technology as a 'liberating force' altering the relationship between producers and consumers of culture and attenuating the traditional role of the expert. In this changed world, pluralism is a key value, as nobody has a monopoly on information. The 'new gatekeepers,' Hewison writes, 'must be persons who open windows and doors' (p. 233). The future of publically funded culture, if it is to be of real public value, must embrace the 'many and not just the few', create trust and respect the arm's length from government. Ultimately, Hewison proposes that the future of culture in Britain depends on its value as a common good, and not as a commodity.

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