



From a UK perspective, the modern European cultural paradigm can appear sophisticated, cosmopolitan and thoroughly mature. From a Northern Irish perspective, however, it is futuristic, otherworldly and positively utopian.

REVIEW:

Sustaining Cultural Development: Unified Systems and New Governance in Cultural Life (Biljana Mickov and James Doyle, eds.: Ashgate, 2013)

STEVEN HADLEY

In *Sustaining Cultural Development*, Biljana Mickov and James Doyle argue that substantial investment in both research and strategic planning is required if programmes to promote greater participation in cultural life are to be effective. Mickov is a cultural manager, researcher and consultant working in Serbia, and Doyle is a cultural manager and practising artist based in Dublin. Both editors thus bring different European perspectives and practitioner backgrounds to bear in assembling a collection of case studies from contributors throughout Europe to evidence their claim that ‘arts and cultural management is increasingly becoming associated with facilitating the mobility and development of society and of urbanisation at a global level’ (p.233).

Given the plethora of arts management courses in universities across the UK and the island of Ireland, one might suggest that the initial premise of this work – namely that research and planning are key to strategic management – is self-evident. However, what this collection of case studies and reports argues is that the combination of cultural concepts relating to ‘identity’, ‘diversity’ and ‘creativity’, with an increase in the cultural participation of citizens, will effectively promote democracy. Enveloped within this idea is a desire to shake up the traditional hierarchies of arts governance, and move to a more horizontal, less top-down bureaucratic structure and networked approach. Democratising the structures of cultural management leads, in this scenario, to a democratisation of cultural participation.

The book’s publication comes at an interesting point in the narrative of civic cultural development, as Derry/Londonderry’s year as UK City of Culture 2013 came to a close amidst the clamour and success of bought-in cultural brands (Turner/Tate, Lumière/Artichoke), and Limerick’s first months as Irish City of Culture 2014 were marked by widely reported funding and management crises. Studies within the book range across Europe’s cities – Barcelona, Luxembourg, Bologna, Cork, Helsinki, Ljubljana, and Eindhoven – names readily associated with cultural accolades and titles. As the editors note, such studies “have been used as sources of research in the field of development of cultural policies in both regional areas and cities” (p.1). The lack of a UK perspective may strike some readers as odd, given the book’s theme: ‘Liverpool’, for example, does not warrant inclusion in the index, though perhaps enough has been written on this topic and city already.

The introduction to this work sets out a confused and confusing manifesto – part call to arms, part retrenchment, part explication and part definition. Such are the vagaries of a broad cultural and editorial approach. This nonetheless is an ambitious book, seeking to articulate a Europe-wide perspective and to gather lived experience and academic analysis into a coherent whole. Many cultural managers from the UK, myself included, can initially struggle to find themselves within the EU paradigm. This is a place where cultural exchange, knowledge

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sharing and inter-cultural dialogue seem to be assumed elements of everyday life, and where unity is a lived philosophical and geographical reality. From a UK perspective, the modern European cultural paradigm can appear sophisticated, cosmopolitan and thoroughly mature. From a Northern Irish perspective, however, it is futuristic, otherworldly and positively utopian.

It is difficult not to conclude that the avowedly EU-wide focus of the book has permitted an assumption of contemporaneity of intellectual ideas across regions that simply may not resonate with readers from all areas. Equally, the phrasing of the introduction soon takes on the gloss of Euro-speak, familiar to anyone who has wrestled with the linguistic jargon (and collaborative demands) of an EU funding application, with terms like 'transversal', 'platform', 'network', 'interchange' and 'laboratory' – and similar metaphors of connectivity – all appearing in the first few pages.

In the context of a section on 'The Facebook Generation', for example, an air of digital utopianism pervades, with the current socio-economic and cultural situation being compared to May 1968. Most arts marketers and cultural managers will be fully aware of the recent decline in Facebook use amongst the key teen demographic, and the subsequent migration to messaging apps which presages another shift in social media consumption, and may find such prose anachronistic. The assertion is further made that 'We live in the age of creativity' (sic). Consider the following:

Economic chaos and climate change sometimes cause natural disasters. The new generation is fresh and free of preoccupied behaviour. They can judge and formulate their own thoughts about their parents' generation. Somehow they are our teachers now... a 2.0 society has been born. (p.231)

These themes of disavowal and renewal permeate much of the text, with seemingly little regard being paid to the vast cultural infrastructure and heritage of Europe. As the introduction notes:

There is no doubt but that the creation of a new and functioning system of cultural development should begin immediately [...] (p.6)

and

Permanent innovation is crucial and the use of new technologies can facilitate the availability of culture to all citizens. (p.6)

Such conceptualisations suggests a break or rupture with the past, as if that which is culturally current is past, and if something is worthy of 'development' it must first be 'new'. The imperative of 'permanent innovation' claimed by the editors brings to mind Lyotard's critique of the postmodern, where

In an amazing acceleration, the generations precipitate themselves. A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant. (Lyotard, 1984, p.79)

The unwritten assumption of the editorial introduction appears to be that, at a time of seemingly unprecedented change at a number of macro levels – across technology, climate, demographics, mobility, economics – we must dismantle and begin anew. Perhaps this is correct, but such a theoretical position would require a sustained and developmental argument, and is ill-served by a collection of reports and essays which were not commissioned for such a purpose. Part of the challenge with the way the book is structured, both in terms of its conception and physical layout, is that different regions of the EU benefit from different levels of resource, expertise and professional development/practice. To this end, a chapter is devoted to informing the reader that 'successful engagement with visitors, audiences or participants is essential to the success of our work in the cultural sector' (p.151) – a point that seems rather remedial from the perspective of most developed cultural regions.

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John Holden's work on cultural value opens this collection and will already be familiar to anyone who has been engaged in this particular policy debate over the past ten years. His 'value triangle' of intrinsic, instrumental and institutional value has, it seems fair to say, been the dominant mode of conceptual transport for the bulk of the UK arts sector's discussion. Setting Holden's argument and methodology at the outset somewhat erroneously implies to the reader that subsequent chapters will proceed, either chronologically and/or conceptually, from this starting point – yet some way into the work the reader is asked,

In such difficult economic times, there is a strong impulse to engage with the language of funders and to limit culture to economic value. But what will it mean if we start to define culture in terms of economic value alone? (p.114)

This is not to say that there is not value in tracing differing trajectories of philosophical and policy development across a range of countries, but a framework to assist the reader in situating the case studies developmentally would help.

Like Holden's work, several of these case studies have been previously published elsewhere, though that is not to say that there is no value in a project which seeks to bring them together under one cover and to offer a unifying theme. 'Agenda 21 for Culture', arising out of Barcelona City Council's Department for Culture provides an interesting example of a political drive to recapture the Catalan cultural identity, suppressed for forty years under Franco, whilst simultaneously developing a promotable cultural identity for the city and advocating the cultural rights of citizens. The chapters on Barcelona seem, in effect, to be Holden's value triangle in action, and it would have been interesting to see a piece written in that vein.

What afflicts some of these studies is that they often read like poorly evidenced final project submissions to public funding bodies (chapter 7), manifestos (chapters 6 and 9), straight narratives (chapter 8) or a combination of all of the above (chapter 22). As such, they tend to be light on empirical evidence, overly conceptualised, and offer the reader little opportunity to make an objective assessment as to their success or, more importantly given the theme of knowledge transfer, their potential applicability in other regions/countries. Moreover, there is an awful lot of 'should' but not very much 'how'.

What becomes apparent (and may be of particular interest to students of cultural policy) is that many of these studies focus on former Capitals of Culture. Their accounts often rest on a teleological narrative of strategy and policy-led initiatives, where the development of documents, strategies and cultural policy led to natural and desired outputs and accolades, and ultimately the Capital of Culture designation. However, the history of two most recent such events in the UK – Liverpool's year as Capital of Culture in 2008, and Derry's year as UK City of Culture in 2013 – suggests a more complex set of contextual factors. In the case of Liverpool and Derry, the recent socio-economic history of the two cities played a significant, if not deciding, role in their selection as Cities of Culture. From the Toxteth Riots in Liverpool in 1981, to the findings of the Bloody Sunday Inquiry in Derry in 2010, and the brutalisation of communities in both cities via the machinations of central government rule – the wider political context of cultural award designations should not be overlooked. In this sense, cities 'deserve' a cultural accolade not simply as a reward for having developed a citizen-focused, community-engaged, diversity-embracing cultural offering, but precisely because their deprivations in other social areas mean that they lack such a thing and 'deserve' to have it put in place. In this regard, a curious note is sounded in the chapter on Bologna, a paragraph of which it is worth quoting in full:

The fact that renowned world orchestras frequently perform in Bologna determines the position and reputation of the city as one that is rich and educated. However, it is the quality of its orchestras, the unique repertoire and the connections that it has with drama and contemporary composition that determine whether

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Bologna is part of an even narrower circle: the one that arouses the interest of educated people. (p.88)

It is difficult to reconcile such an ideological position with the progressive themes and arguments of the rest of the work. For example, we are told at the close of the book: 'World views and value systems can be created through art and culture, thereby assisting the overall development of the human race' (p.234).

The over-riding impression of this work is a kind of muddled utopianism, which begins with basic tenets of policy management – well thought-out strategies, clear objectives, solid research, planned implementation, ongoing evaluation – and combines them with a loose rhetoric of globalisation, multiculturalism and diversity, adds a dash of tech-evangelism, and is sprinkled liberally with demands for 'innovation'. We are told, for example, that 'It is SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Time-based) to think in different ways, outside the box, within your own generation' (p.226). This most famous of management school mnemonic acronyms is, in essence, a tool for simplicity and transparency in the articulation and implementation of organisational objectives. The attempt to transpose its meaning is misguided. The purpose of arts management should surely not be the mangling of management theory with the rhetoric of innovation, but rather the liberation of creativity from bureaucracy.

About the reviewer: Steven Hadley is a PhD candidate in Cultural Policy at Queen's University Belfast, where he also teaches on the MA in Arts Management. His research interests include the relationship between culture and democracy, and the role of ideology in cultural policy. Steven has over twenty years' arts marketing and management experience, and works as a management consultant in the cultural sector. Twitter: @mancinbelfast