



## REVIEW:

*Culture, democracy and the right to make art: the British Community Arts Movement* (edited by Alison Jeffers and Gerry Moriarty, London, Bloomsbury, 2017) 263 pp., £64.80 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1-4742-5835-7

DR STEVEN HADLEY

As arts and cultural policy scholars and practitioners will be aware, 'cultural democracy' is having a moment. Since the publication of this book by Alison Jeffers and Gerri Moriarty (with associated events in Manchester and Belfast) the topic of cultural democracy has become increasingly prevalent. Forthcoming conferences in York (Be SpectACTive!, October 2018) and Manchester (The International Conference of Social Theory, Politics and the Arts, November 2018) will engage in debates around the notion of cultural democracy and the role of audience participation in performing arts and cultural policy.

The recent publication of *Towards Cultural Democracy: Promoting cultural capabilities for everyone* (Wilson, Gross & Bull, 2017), a result of research collaboration with the BBC's *Get Creative* campaign amongst others, provided a useful, though not unproblematic (Hadley, 2018) overview of recent activity undertaken – at least partly – within the nomenclature of cultural democracy. Ideas of participatory democracy are also evident in the work of the Movement for Cultural Democracy, an overtly political coalition of organisations, groups and individuals seeking cultural democracy in the UK which has recently launched the draft *Manifesto for Cultural Democracy* (Movement for Cultural Democracy, 2018). Arts Council England's positioning as an advocate for everyday creativity was evidenced by the report *Everyday Creativity* (64 Million Artists, 2016) and, more importantly, by its flagship programme, Creative People and Places (CPP). As ACE's Chair, Sir Nicholas Serota (2018, p.1) recently wrote on the topic of CPP, "...we are engaged on what might prove to be one of the most significant cultural journeys of our time."

The contemporary discourse of cultural democracy has a long, complex and frequently contested history. This is in no small way due to 'cultural democracy' being an idea both simple in theory and complex in implementation. As Rosenstein (2018, p. 223) notes, "Initially, cultural democracy was less of a plan of action than it was a position". This situation is compounded by the genealogy of the idea being inextricably bound up (from a UK perspective) in the semi-documented history of the Community Arts Movement. As such, this book – based on the experiences of those involved in community arts across the UK in the 1970s and 1980s – is both fortuitously timely in its publication and of considerable value in historically grounding contemporary debates. The book also goes some way to addressing the attendant problems of historicity and narrative which result from the bulk of this practice pre-dating the 'digital age'. An obvious, but important example of this for cultural policy scholars is the fact that key works from the era (e.g. Braden, 1978; Kelly, 1984, 1985) have long been out of print.

The aim of this edited volume is to trace the developments, debates and contestations in British community arts from the 1960s until today. Divided into two parts, consisting of a total of 12 chapters, this is not a straightforward history but rather a curated series of recollections invoking selected 'memories, dreams, reflections' of the Community Arts Movement. Eschewing a strict chronological approach, the book allows multiple inter-connected themes, ideas and narratives to flow across its two halves. The first part focuses on community

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arts in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (addressed in individually-authored chapters) in the 1970s and early 1980s. The second part reflects on the differences and similarities between the historic movements and contemporary practices, highlighting the policy changes that occurred in the late 1990s and providing a critical re-assessment of the movement and its emanation into contemporary arts practice and the 'participative turn' in cultural policy (Bonet and Négrier, 2018).

The chosen format of first-person narratives allows a certain subjectivity to be introduced: the artists and practitioners engaged through the research inevitably have a high degree of emotional attachment to their labour which requires a strong personal commitment that can be subjectively experienced as selflessness and passion (Dubois, 2015). Yet as Oliver Bennett (p.173) argues in his chapter on community arts as cultural policy, this is because for many of those working in community arts, "...the struggle for 'cultural democracy' was part of a broader struggle for the greater democratization of all aspects of political, economic, and institutional life."

The book's most significant contribution, aside from its considerable value in documenting the Community Arts Movement, is in this emphasis on the political nature of cultural authority, echoing Kelly's (1984, p. 133) assertion that cultural democracy was "a revolutionary demand." Such sentiment is echoed by Gerri Moriarty who plainly states that, through representation to vehicles such as the Community Arts Working Group set up in 1974, community artists were actively engaged in a bold attempt to subvert the machinery of public arts subsidy. Indeed,

There can be no true exploration of cultural democracy without the acknowledgement that hierarchies of cultural value have always been, and always will be, imbricated in questions of power and authority

(Hadley and Belfiore, 2018, p. 222)

The repeated invocation of a political demand is what links the historical testimony of the book to the present-day context of the subsidised arts, and the increasingly stark empirical landscape of a deeply problematised sector (Neelands et al., 2015; Taylor, 2016; Brook, O'Brien, & Taylor, 2018). As such, the closing chapter from the co-editors on 'Opening a New Space for Cultural Politics' provides a purposeful jumping off point for new research around the role and tactics of dissent in forging a more equitable – *more democratic* – cultural policy.

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*About the reviewer:* Dr Steven Hadley is Visiting Research Fellow at the School of Performance and Cultural Industries, University of Leeds and Research Associate at the Department of Music, University of Sheffield. He is also Policy and Reviews Editor for *Cultural Trends* and works internationally as an Associate Consultant with The Audience Agency. His forthcoming book, 'Audience Development and Cultural Policy' is published by Palgrave MacMillan.