

HISTORIES OF PARTICIPATION, VALUE AND GOVERNANCE

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Policy discourse, cultural value and the ‘buzzwords of participation’

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UEP and the history of the discursive formations of cultural policymaking

- * How and why has a certain understanding of cultural participation become so dominant and central to political discourse and policymaking in England?
- * What forms of participation in cultural and civic activities were excluded from a value-laden understanding of participation enshrined in cultural institutions and policies?
- * What kind of power relations and institutional and governmental interests might lie behind ideas of desirable and/or legitimate cultural participation?

Flashpoints in the history of 'participation buzzwords'

- * From the war years to the establishment and consolidation of ACGB
- * Late 1970s to early 1990s – anxiety over relativism and 'standards'
- * The New Labour Years (aka 'The Golden Age')
- * 2008 The return to excellence (aka 'The McMaster backlash')
- * 2014- The return to engagement and participation? (aka 'the 8%' meme)

What's behind the buzzwords?

- * Buzzwords are rhetorical tools deployed to do political and ideological work that is often about obfuscation
- * Buzzwords – and their argumentative centrality in policy discourse, should not be taken as a simple and straightforward indication of their true centrality to the realpolitik of cultural policy making
- * So, where to look instead?

Embedding values in institutions: From CEMA to the ACGB

A time when many of the key tensions that will remain latent throughout British cultural policy were first played out:

- * Professional/amateur (democratization of culture/cultural democracy)
- * Metropolis/the provinces
- * High/low (concerns with 'standards', hostility for popular/commercial culture)
- * excellence/access and education

CEMA and the value of participation

- * Mostly funded existing bodies such as the National Council of Social Service (precursor of NCVO), the British Federation of Music Festivals, the British Institute of Adult Education
- * In the first few months CEMA *only* funded amateur work
- * CEMA funded professional theatre for the first time in 1940:
 - * The Pilgrim Players (Canterbury)
 - * The Old Vic (assisting its move to Burnley)

So, what happened?

From *Off-Stage* the personal memoirs of Charles Landstone (1953), recalling 1942:

‘According to Miss Glasgow it was Lord Keynes who had decided to reverse the policy of abstention from support of theatrical work in London. He was already looking at the post-war future; he believed that C.E.M.A., if it were to justify its existence, must not only bring succour to the provinces, but also set a standard in London which should be an example to the whole country’.

Who deserves ‘standards’?

Charles Landstone recalls an episode from 1951:

A visit to Salisbury to see Noel Coward’s *Tonight at 8:30* with Bronson Albery, Director of Wyndham Theatres Ltd., member of the drama panel since 1945, of the Council in 1947, and since 1949 the only drama representative on the ACGB Executive.

Sir Bronson: “This is magnificent. But it’s much too good for Salisbury”.

'Amateur' participation progressively squeezed out of ACGB

Secretary-General of ACGB Nigel Abercrombie in the 1963-4 ACGB Annual Report:

'Is there a case for a special body, perhaps on the lines of the proposed Sports Council, to deal with amateur activities as part of a "youth service", or as part of some wider general social service concerned with public provision for "leisure"?'

'youth service'? 'general social service'? 'leisure'?

Who knows, but amateur participation clearly not 'arts' and not ACGB's business!

Jennie Lee to the House of Commons in 1970

“ I have insisted there should be no cutting back on metropolitan standards in order to spread the available money more evenly throughout the country. That would be the worst possible disservice”

(in Hutchison 1982)

Conclusions

- * The evolution of CEMA into ACGB shows the intense debates and clashes of views at the time.
- * The successful 'side' was led by powerful individuals and interests driven by a clear sense of what forms of cultural production and consumption are valuable and who 'deserves' them.
- * By the time the 'participation buzzwords' burst into powerful discourses, those values were embedded in arts council's modus operandi
- * The more rhetorical prominence participation acquires, the lesser it indicates a real challenge to the status quo (Belfiore 2012; Jancovich 2015)