

Should governments
subsidise the arts?



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Introduction

There are major disagreements characterising the literature regarding the justification of government involvement in subsidising the arts. On one hand, there are those who argue that in our current climate of austerity and the looming possibility of a ‘no-deal Brexit’ the government should not be funding the arts when there are more important matters to be had. On the other hand, proponents of government subsistence argue that art is more important than ever for the enjoyment of our people, the education of our children, and for enriching the cultural development of our society. This essay will begin with a brief explanation of the current debate regarding the social value of the arts before moving onto the negative and positive debates on the arts. Art tackles a multitude of issues, unfortunately, it is not possible to go into all so this work will briefly focus on social exclusion. It will show that the arts, with a focus on museums, give a voice to those that would not normally be heard. It is imperative the government subsidises the arts, who else will speak up for the voiceless?

The Debate

For those who disagree with government funding, one of the main arguments is the debate about arts social value. If the arts were to receive no funding from governments, the debate on social value would be reduced to a recondite affair to be conducted by an art connoisseur away from the public arena. However, it is important to note that whether artists are funded or not, art will offend at times and that will always spark a public debate. At times it is more often the government funding and its legitimising of the art that becomes the topic of debate rather than the art itself. It is then the

government-funded cultural policy and the status conferred on the arts that are responsible for the debate on its social value. Those who wish to see the arts as an important part of the public domain welcome this debate on value, however this debate on government-funding has come at a cost. What would be imagined to be an incredible rigorous discussion of complex issues has, in fact, turned rather simplistic focusing on the ‘measurable impact’ of the arts. This is in part due to the ‘evidence-based policy-making’ that has become a necessity in Britain for most areas of policy, thus determining the terms of debate regarding the arts. Estelle Morris illustrates the terms of this debate when she argues that:

Arts and Culture make a contribution to health, to education, to crime reduction, to strong communities, to the economy, and to the nation’s well-being but I don’t always know how to evaluate it or describe it. We have to find a language and a way of describing its worth. It’s the only way we’ll secure the greater support we need.

(Morris 2003)

Negative Tradition

Art as a negative influence argument on the moral or epistemological plane goes back to Plato’s Republic. Here, Plato offers what is believed to be the first rejection of trust in the epistemological role of the arts, arguing artists and poets do not have privileged access to understanding or superior knowledge. He argues that “An image-maker, a representer, understands only appearance, while reality is beyond him” (1993, p. 352). In other words, artwork cannot transmit any form of moral teaching.

Despite the endurance of the belief in the cognitive powers of the arts, the denial of the possibility that experiencing the arts may allow privileged access to knowledge and truth has persistently been voiced in the centuries that separate us from Plato. Perhaps surprisingly, such denials sometimes came from artists and writers themselves. Baudelaire, for instance, wrote: “Truth and songs have nothing to do with one another”; this was because “the artist depends on nobody but himself ... He is his own king, his priest and his god” (in Passmore 1991, p. 106). In other words, the artists’ works, according to Baudelaire, refer to nothing beyond themselves, and therefore cannot guarantee access to any superior sphere of knowledge and understanding. Advocates of the arts claim that new knowledge is produced that was unknown before, however, skeptics suggest that this is untrue, the arts they believe creates no new knowledge, rather it is knowledge reiterated albeit in a new novel way (Carroll 2002). The arts, it is argued put forward propositions about human behaviour, and it is up to the individual to agree or not (Hospers 1960).

Influenced heavily by Plato’s treatment of poetry and theatre, Christians began attacking the arts as they believed it would influence people who enjoyed them to attempt to emulate what they had seen in their everyday life. This was a belief that did not go away, in England, Puritans against theatre began spreading hate from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. In his polemic against the arts, John Northbrooke, *A Treatise Against Dicing, Dancing, Plays, and Interludes* (1577) wrote:

I am persuaded that Satan hath not a more speedie way and fitter schoole to work and teach his desire, to bring men and women into his snare of

concupiscence and filthy lusts of wicked whoredome, that those places and playes, and theatres are

(cited in Truman 2003, p. 57)

This may seem outdated but it is necessary to examine how ideas about particular performances are damaging to young minds. If they constantly hear negative rhetoric towards the arts then it is possible they will emulate what they hear.

Positive Thinking

Positive thinking about the arts includes a variety of different categories including their impact on social change, health and well-being and even arts cathartic effect. The catharsis effect began with Aristotle (384-322 BC).

Aristotle, in his most notable work *Poetics*, explains that experiencing emotions through what an individual sees in a performance leaves an individual 'purified.' It is this researchers belief that the categories of the arts mentioned above have all originated from Aristotle's idea of catharsis. For example, Moreno's psychotherapeutic theatre, and art therapy represent the continuous evolution of the benefits of the arts on the individual.

Csikszentmihalyi (1996) suggests that the arts have a more important role to play in peoples evolution over biological factors.

French philosophers Voltaire, Diderot, and Alembert promoted the idea of the 'social value of the aesthetic sphere' proposing that art could shape moral values within French citizens. Art, they believed was to be used for mankind's moral improvement (Saisselin 1970). This notion of moral improvement was taken on by the Romantics who believed that poetry was “

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the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth” (Shelley 1954, p. 281).

The influence of French thought and the Romantics on arts power became a guiding principle for contemporary cultural policy making. Over the last decade, cultural policy-making has come to the fore on the role of subsidised arts in tackling a multitude of issues like gender identity, environmental issues, immigration, and social exclusion.

The following section will focus briefly on the topic of social exclusion, before moving onto museums as places of social change.

Social Exclusion

The term ‘ social exclusion’ exploded into European policy documents in the late 1980s, with it becoming more frequent in the United Kingdom (UK) in the 1990s (Peace 2001). The European Union (EU) was having an increasingly difficult time to input words without heavy negative connotations like ‘ poverty’. Social exclusion was used to brand the EU’s Poverty Programmes (Peace 2001). Social exclusion appears to have developed in France, where it is associated with membership or citizenship (Bhalla and Lapeyre 1999). In his work *Les Exclus* (1974), the French sociologist Lenoir argued that marginalisation of the lower classes and their exclusion from the labour market results in a breakdown of the social contract, thus citizens feel as though they do not belong anywhere and feel their disadvantages to a higher degree. This was a large concern in the British arts sector before Lenoir published his work. In the Arts Council’s Royal Charter (1967) it states there is an obligation to increase public access to all of Britain’s social classes.

Social exclusion as a concept sees disadvantage, not as a single layer, rather it is multidimensional. For this work, an important dimension in the discussion on social exclusion is its focus on the positive role of the arts in alleviating the symptoms of social exclusion. The arts positive role in social inclusion is endorsed by the government through the Department of Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS). The government's commitment towards inclusion has a large impact on subsidising the arts. Implementing their inclusion policy means DCMS partners with the Arts Council of England (ACE), Department for Education and Employment and a whole host of other bodies. By having these partnerships allocate resources, it then, in theory, should alleviate any concerns that decisions are not affected by politics. Nevertheless, all funding decisions are informed by a funding agreement between the ACE and the DCMS, which needs to show through a series of indicators that it is fulfilling the government's arts objectives.

Museums Give A Voice

Museums are associated with 'elitist' forms of art, with public resources being diminished museums have needed to present their case for their continued role in society. According to a document published by the DCMS in 2000, museums need to engage with the people by "empowering people to determine their place in the world, educate themselves to achieve their own potential" (2000, p. 8). In this document the DCMS describes museums becoming agents of change and social inclusion. There are those who argue that museums are "products of the establishment and authenticate the established or official values and image of a society in several ways, directly, by promoting and affirming the dominant values" (Ames cited in Sandell,

1998, pp. 407-408). Sandell (1998) furthers this by suggesting that museums actually reinforce prejudice and discrimination (Sandell 1998, p. 408).

Museums are tackling various issues including cultural deprivation, social exclusion/inclusion, gender stereotypes all while attempting to reach the widest audience possible. Museums are giving a voice to those who have been silenced in the past. There have been an increasing amount of museums engaging in outreach work, the Tate Modern, for example, built a resource centre but also holds training sessions for unemployed people around the Bankside area. Humaira Abid is one artist who is giving voice to the silenced. In her work *Searching for Home*, she captures the horrific experiences of refugees using intricate wood carvings and miniature paintings. Abid's work focuses on the struggles of females in the refugee crisis giving a voice to taboo subjects like rape and menstruation. Her parents fled India during the Partition so Abid grew up listening to the struggles of migrants and refugees. Abid's work is so important in opening up the discussion on the female plight while fleeing as most refugee stories are from a male perspective. Her piece 'Borders and Boundaries' a pair of underwear hangs from a barbed-wire fence with a thick red bloodstain (Christensen 2018) . Art like this is important in opening up a dialogue and letting those without a voice be heard.

Conclusion

This work began with a brief discussion on the current debate regarding the social value of the arts before focusing on both the negative and positive debates. By focusing on social exclusion and on the work of Humaira Abid, this work has opened up the dialogue on the continued role of the museums

and the arts and showing why the government needs to keep its commitment in funding the arts.

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