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‘Creativity is for people – arts for posh people’

Popular culture and the UK New Labour Government

Kate Oakley

University of Leeds

Introduction

This chapter considers both the understanding and treatment of popular culture in a particular period of British political history, that of the New Labour government, 1997-2010. Widely seen as popularizing, through identification with pop musicians and football (soccer) as well as through initiatives such as the Millennium Dome (McGuigan & Gilmore 2002) and the National Centre for Popular Music (Brabazon & Mallinder 2006), the chapter argues that in fact New Labour struggled with popular culture, much as its predecessors had. While seen as useful for the branding of a ‘young country,’ particularly in the early days of the Administration (Blair 2004), and for differentiating themselves from Conservative predecessors, with their concern for heritage and what was seen as a nostalgic understanding of Britain’s culture, New Labour’s promotion of popular culture, with the interesting exception of film, was largely symbolic. For the most part cultural funding supported the institutions it has always supported (Jancovitch 2011), the interests of rights-owners were consistently preferred over those of popular culture audiences, and popular cultural ‘tradition’, was left to the mercy of the marketplace in a way that would have been unthinkable for ‘high’ cultural forms. Yet far from being a specifically New Labour problem, the chapter argues that this represents a long-term tension in the Labour party (Bianchini forthcoming 2014) and on the British Left in general and a public policy failure that is characteristic, not only of the UK.

Understanding popular culture

New Labour politicians were sensitive to the claim that the party was obsessed with presenting itself as modern. Shortly after entering office in 1997, the then-culture minister Chris Smith complained that talk of ‘Cool Britannia’ gave the impression that, in cultural terms, New Labour felt “anything modern is good and anything traditional bad,” (Smith 1998:4). It was an irritation he repeated when we interviewed him in 2012,

“I got quite frustrated by the fixation that quite a lot of the media had on this notion that the Blair era was part of some new *esprit du temps* that actually, was not related to what was going onⁱ.”

What was going on, according to Smith, was a desire to break down the distinction between high and popular culture, a desire which would be channeled into New Labour’s favored buzzwords of ‘access’ and ‘excellence’, with the unfortunate and unintended consequence that the former term was associated with popular culture and the latter with high culture. Smith would have recoiled from any suggestion that popular culture could not be excellent and indeed there is some irony in the fact that New Labour figures were routinely mocked by their critics for liking popular music or football, as if such tastes could never in fact be genuine, but must spring from a mistaken desire to seem like one of the masses.

However, as Looseley argues (2011), in his comparison of French and British approaches to popular cultural policy, while an admirable aspiration, in fact the discussion of breaking down distinctions is often simply a way to avoid questions of quality, judgment or even

meaning in culture – questions that British cultural policymakers have sought to duck since Lord Melbourne’s heartfelt remark, ‘God helps the Minister that meddles with art,’ back in the 1840s. While judgments about quality in the traditional art forms could safely be left to experts; applied to popular culture, policymakers seem to struggle with the notion of expertise, too often falling back on the representatives of the larger cultural industry firms, who having ‘cracked’ the market for pop music or videogames, were assumed to be its guardians.

When it came into office in 1997, New Labour inherited a tradition of cultural policy interventions, many deriving from the urban cultural policy initiatives of cities like London and Sheffield, which took popular culture seriously and sought to support it with public funds. Since 1994, with the birth of the National Lottery, the arts had experienced something of a boost (Putnam and Ellis 1998). In regions such as the North West of England, regional arts funders had seized an opportunity to support different sorts of cultural organisations – small businesses, as well as not-for-profits – in popular culture, as well as subsidised arts organizations (O’Connor and Gu 2013). In part this was determined by the politics and social orientation of many of those active in local arts and cultural scenes; popular culture as the culture of the people was more like to be able to respond to and express the problems people were facing, from unemployment to sexism or racism. It was not that traditional art forms could not address these issues, even the highest of high art forms does so, but that widening and deepening the canon allowed communities and individuals’ expression that had hitherto been denied or marginalized.

This was New Labour’s inheritance, but it was not necessarily New Labour’s understanding. Wary of anything that could be seen as class politics (or at least as working class politics),

and of attachment to tradition, New Labour's cultural politics owed more to the postmodernism of Marxism Today magazine than it did to the traditional culture of the British Left. While such a hinterland could offer improved understandings of race, sexuality and gender relations; it was less attuned to the politics of place, which had animated the Specials *Ghost Town*, or the TV series *Boys from the Blackstuff*, as part of their concern about unemployment. Unemployment, in these expressions, was not a general evil to be inveighed against, but a specific concern of people in particular places, and indeed it was suffered by particular people in particular places. Yet, as Rutherford argues (2013), the desire to see identity as a continually shifting category, meant disentangling the subject from 'cultural locatedness.' Instead, as he argues, having 'lost' the battle of English identity (not Scots, Welsh or Northern Irish identity, which have different narratives) to the New Right and to Margaret Thatcher, New Labour came to power still fearing England as "a reactionary country"(2013: 13). In this context, where as Doreen Massey had argued (1994); any seeking after a sense of place was suspect, New Labour's

"mixture of social liberalism and economic liberalism led to a post-national cosmopolitanism which tended to valorise novelty, the global and change, over the ordinary, the local, and belonging" (Rutherford 2013:).

Instead New Labour sought a popular culture that was detached from place and particularity. The narrative that became the creative industries and later still the creative economy, consistently stressed the dynamism of the marketplace. In several Arts Council documents of the period, the vibrancy of the commercial cultural world is contrasted with what is perceived to be the precarious state of public arts funding.

The state of the arts in Britain in the 1990s is characterised by an apparent paradox of, on one hand, financial instability within the public arts sector and on the other, thriving commercial success within the wider cultural industries (Hitchen 1997:1).

For organization such as the Arts Council, the danger was being relegated to the ‘ghetto’ of subsidised culture, when the opportunity was perceived to lie elsewhere. In a note of the meeting between the Brunswick Public Relations company and the Arts Council’s Strategy Group at the dawn of the New Labour Administration (Brunswick 1997), the need to identify the arts as part of the creative industries was made clear, “Creativity is for people – arts for posh people,” it stated. While music, design and the fashion industry were described as “dynamic and innovative’,” the public arts economy was seen as unstable, heavily under-resourced and suffering from personnel problems exacerbated by low pay, weak training and development (Hitchen 1997: 2). The solution, (and one could easily imagine others), was to place the not-for-profit sectors of the arts within the wider creative industries or creative economy, identifying them with the ‘democratic’ notion of creativity. By the same token, the traditional ‘arts’ seen as needing subsidy, were therefore *not* popular culture, despite a long history on the Left that might suggest otherwise (Samuel 2006; Bevir 2011)

Chris Smith, New Labour’s first Secretary of State for culture claimed that this approach was in part about, ‘bringing democracy to culture’ (1998:2), which he saw not as challenging the traditional makers and gatekeepers of culture, but as promoting access to culture that had already moved beyond distinctions of ‘high’ and ‘low’. In his praise for the vibrancy of commercial culture, Smith seems to suggest a different notion of cultural democracy from that which had been developing, albeit unevenly, at the local and regional level in the UK. As O’Connor (2009) argues, that idea required public intervention in the marketplace for

popular culture to try and ensure a more democratic culture based on embedded local markets. Smith's line, however, echoed by Arts Council documents at the time, was in danger of *conflating* popular culture with democratic culture and, therefore, markets with democracy. Smith's argument was concerned with placing the subsidised arts sectors not at the side of, or as an alternative to, commercial culture, but very much within "a vibrant, resourceful and robust cultural economy" (Hitchen nd:4). But it assumed that having done so they would thrive rather than wither, and moreover, that the type of public intervention necessary was consistent with the broadly de-regulatory market-based approach that New Labour took to other areas of economic policy. It was not *laissez faire*; but the focus was on supply-side measures, help for small business start-ups, skills training for workers and subsidized work spaces. Intervention in terms of ownership, pricing or restricting market power was off the table.

Popular cultural policies

This can be seen most clearly in what can be described as New Labour's popular culture policy. To describe it as such may suggest a more coherent approach than in fact one can point to, and of course popular culture policies can range far and wide, from broadcasting to sport to urban regeneration without necessarily being labeled as 'popular culture.' But it is worth considering some of the popular culture interventions of the period to see if one can determine how the understanding, described above, dictated policy.

Given its view of popular culture, that it was essentially commercial culture, there should be little surprise that New Labour took its cue on policy from those who ran successful commercial businesses. The Creative Industries (CI) Taskforce was established after New Labour took office, with a remit to recommend steps to maximise the economic impact of the UK's creative industries at home and abroad (DCMS 1998). In addition to the civil service representatives of various Government departments, members were largely drawn from commercial cultural businesses. They included fashion designer Paul Smith, Eric Salama of advertising giant WPP, Gail Rebeck from publishers Random House and Robert Deverueux from Virgin Media as well as long time Labour supporters such as film director David Puttnam and Waheed Ali (founder of the TV production company, Planet 24).

Smith described this as “a way of bringing in people from the outside world who knew what they were talking about,” but what they were talking about in this case was a particular sort of large, transnational cultural industry business. Alan McGee as founder of Creation Records and a Scot, might be seen as one of the few representatives of non-metropolitan culture, though his days as an independent record company boss were long over by 1997, and there were no examples of local or regional cultural organizations on the Taskforce. The first output of the Taskforce, known somewhat inaccurately as Mapping Documents (DCMS 1998, 2001a), were notable for the national lens through which they viewed the creative industries and it was not until 2000, following reports on export promotion (DCMS 1999a, 1999c) that a sub-group considered the issue of the creative industries at a regional level (DCMS 2000a).

The information resources and hence arguments were thus dominated by larger cultural businesses, with civil servants in particular, in a new and weak Government department,

having little in the way of what Bevir would call a ‘tradition’ (Bevir 2000) or policy narrative to counter or even add to that of the Taskforce. Smith described the first meeting of the Taskforce thus,

“all the ministers came along with their briefs prepared by the civil servants and as we were going around the table with everyone contributing, they would read out their briefs, as ministers sometimes do. And then the outsiders started contributing and saying well, actually it doesn’t happen like that at all. This is what’s important and this is what’s happening and this is what’s going on,”

In this case, an asymmetry of informational resources was fairly clear from the start and ‘what was going on,’ was not deemed to require input from small cultural business, individual practitioners, not for profits, arts advocates, or trade unions.

The irony of New Labour’s policies for the newly-dubbed creative industries however was that, having completed its work by 2000, the CI Taskforce was wound up and the UK’s Culture Ministry, in the words of one of its own Secretaries of State rather ‘dropped the story’ of creative industries policyⁱⁱ. Instead, most policy activity in the sense of funding decisions and organizational creation went on at the local and regional level, though the inheritance from the Taskforce was a clear, ideological one. Popular culture was commercial culture, the creative industries as a notion was a useful expression of this culture and its presumed dynamism, and market mechanisms were the primary ways of assisting that dynamism.

Thus in terms of policies for popular culture, a pro-market approach was generally favoured. While the Broadcasting Act 1996, passed just before New Labour came into office, enabled

the Minister for Culture to ensure that certain sporting events (such as the FA Cup Final and Wimbledon) were kept on free-to air TV, little effort was made to extend the list or to respond to the concerns of those who saw the huge drain of live sports such as Test Cricket from free to air to pay TV. Ticket prices for cultural events such as the Glastonbury Festival or Premiership football were allowed to find a (high) market level, though ticket prices for classical and the opera remained subsidised. And, as Cloonan argues, the secondary sale of tickets for popular music remained legal; suggesting again that the 'protection' of popular music however important a part of British culture it is felt to be, was rarely taken seriously (Cloonan 2011).

In terms of outlets for popular culture, while the loss of record shops from the high street was part of a wider shift to online consumption rather than a failing of New Labour, little effort was made to tighten planning legislation in favour of small book and record shops, pubs or nightclubs, all crucial elements of the urban cultural ecosystem. Similarly for live music, the 2003 Licensing Act, made licensing a requirement even for small scale musical events in pubs. Although the chilling effect of this was not as bad as had been feared, and there was some response to the vigorous campaign against the Act, its passing hardly suggested a deep concern for the traditional wellsprings of popular cultural taste formation.

In terms of funding, while elements of popular culture undoubtedly benefitted from some creative industry support, particularly that channeled by Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) to workspace, training and other industry support, as Jancovitch has argued, core arts funding showed little shift (Jancovitch 2011; Gilmore 2013). In 2005, 85 per cent of money to cultural organisations went to those who had been funded before New Labour came to power. Many such organisations were no doubt doing a great job – and long term, reliable

funding would help with that - but the lack of recognition for what Gilmore calls, “ordinary, ‘quiet’ and everyday forms of cultural participation,” is apparent (Gilmore 2013: 92).

The huge growth in the use of digital technology during the New Labour period and the birth of social media, did lead, along with the coining of ugly neologisms such as ‘prosumers’, to an explosion of interest in the cultural activities that people, particularly young people were undertaking online. But this focus arguably obscured interest in forms of non-digital participation. More significantly, cultural surveys throughout the period, particular the government-funded Taking Part surveyⁱⁱⁱ, which measured people’s participation in formal cultural activities, tend to portray ‘non participation’ in culture as a problem to be solved (Miles & Sullivan 2010; Jancovitch 2011; Gilmore 2013). Instead of starting from a consideration of what activities people get up to in their spare time; such surveys tend to present certain activities as cultural and others as not, fixing in policymakers minds a deficit model that can only be solved by prescribing more formal cultural activities – and thus consistently avoiding questions such as, what do people like to do, and what constitutes popular culture in this place?

An example of the popular culture ‘problem’ in the UK can be seen in the case of policy for videogames; one of the more significant cultural developments of the period. In late 1990s, British-developed games accounted for about 12 per cent of the US market and 25 per cent of the European, and the UK ranked second only to Japan in authoring computer games software (Leadbeater & Oakley, 2000). Having somewhat accidentally acquired a burgeoning videogames sector, the tone was often celebratory, but in reality policymakers had little idea what to do with an activity with clear economic potential, but, to them, uncertain cultural merit.

Subsequent policy accounts of this period (see for example, Bakhshi, Mateos-Garcia & Gatland 2010) have often lamented the fact that the UK gave away what was appeared to be an economic advantage in a growing industry; but considerably less attention has been paid to the fact that it also gave away a cultural one. When I was interviewing UK games developers in the late 1990s, they often made reference to what they saw as the specific culture of British games; its links to the rave/club culture of the 1990s, fondness for fantasy or so called 'god' games (the first 'god' game is generally considered to be *Populous* developed in 1989 by British videogames auteur Peter Molyneux), and a general preference for original story material over, for example, sports franchises. Developing original material however, unless it could be pursued into a highly successful series such as *Grand Theft Auto*, was always going to be a less profitable business than developing existing franchises, but many developers, Molyneux amongst them, often showed a preference for working in smaller firms on original material, rather than developing larger ones. As such the UK videogames industry suffered the fate of other UK cultural industries, with lots of small development companies, but no large publishers who could support development, hence developers went from project funding to project finding, essentially working for hire, and found it difficult to hold on to their intellectual property rights and build up a secure revenue stream. As the industry developed throughout the 2000s, the growth of mobile and online gaming required higher levels of investment, which many British development studios found difficult to support and the UK industry was seen to suffer in comparison with countries like France and Canada, who established videogames sectors somewhat later than the UK had, but provided them with a good deal of public support (Bakhshi, Mateos-Garcia & Gatland, 2010).

At the time of writing, the UK is still awaiting its first tax relief for video games (it is delayed by European Union concerns about state aid), though the legislation to introduce it was brought in by the current Coalition Government, along with other 'creative industry' tax reliefs for animation and 'high end' television, on a model that had been operating in the film industry since 2007. The first attempt to secure a tax relief for the videogames industry however, started around 2000 and founded, not on economic but on cultural grounds. When the independent games developers industry body TIGA began to lobby for an extension of the tax reliefs available for research and development for issues such as the 'look and feel' of games characters, the then-department for Trade and Industry, the UK's industry ministry (subject to a bewildering change of names since then) refused on the grounds that while there was a cultural argument for specific tax breaks for the film industry, no such arguments existed for games. And indeed this was hardly surprising as such an argument had rarely been made. Even those organisations supportive of the videogames sector, such as the publicly-funded National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA), were generally promoting the supposed economic and job-creating credentials of the sector; cultural arguments about the particularity of UK games, the need for diversity in the games markets, the importance of a variety of voices in cultural production, were not made in the case of videogames. Moral panics about the downsides of gaming culture could in part account for this, but in addition there was a consistency in the perception of videogames that has been applied to other popular cultural forms in the past. Videogames were viewed as technological gizmos, gamers were alternately celebrated and suspect (Miller 2006), but the meaning of games and what games might have to tell us about the world were a subject fit for discussion only among fans.

The communications regulator, Ofcom, floated the idea of public funding for content development, beyond broadcasting and cross digital platform in 2007 (Ofcom 2007). Sometimes described as ‘the public service publisher,’ this might have held out the possibility of a great pluralism in videogame content, but the idea, already constrained as it was by the belief that only markets can drive innovation and quality,’ never came to fruition (see Freedman, 2009 for a discussion), and the majority of public funding for games development, was for so-called ‘serious games,’ in other words ones that are of use to the military.

The problems of popular cultural policy

The failure to engage with the question of meaning in popular culture and hence with debates about quality, or value, and meant not only that popular culture was often left to the mercy of the market as described above, but that the terrain on which the debate was held was never shifted. New Labour’s creative industry policies supported a variety of popular cultural activities, but beyond populist gestures, the case for *why* the state should take a role in popular culture was made only as an economic one. And that case was weakened by the fact that advocates were constantly over-claiming for the economic success of these sectors, thus raising the question, and not just in the minds of skeptical Treasury officials, of why should the state should put public money into something that was allegedly booming anyway.

So far has the creative industries notion now drifted from any notion of cultural meaning that the latest attempt to revive the debate, NESTA’s ‘Manifesto’ for the Creative Economy (Bakhshi, Hargreaves & Mateos-Garcia, 2013) defines the creative industries as “those sectors which specialise in the use of creative talent for commercial purposes,” which not only presumably rules out sectors such as television, which in many countries is a mix of

commercial and public provision, but completes the fusion of popular culture with the commercial.

This tendency not to ask questions about the nature of popular cultural extended most profoundly to questions of quality. Although unavoidable in terms of the media, debates about the ‘dumbing down’ of BBC output being a permanent feature of British life, politicians, even those who seek to engage in questions of culture as some New Labour ministers did (Jowell, 2004) tended to avoid talk of quality as inherently elitist. The cultural, later creative, industries were valorized by policymakers largely because of their presumed economic dynamism, but also because they promised a way out of the excellence/access impasse; in the cultural industries the consumer was sovereign and market could rule (Looseley, 2011).

This of course leaves cultural policy free to return to its home base of support for the traditional arts, or at least those art forms seen as unable to make it in the market. This process had already begun under New Labour, as Looseley notes (Looseley 2011); with Culture Minister Tessa Jowell’s wrestle with ‘Government and the Value of Culture,’ a ‘personal essay’ written in 2004 (Jowell, 2004). In it, she again seeks to reject distinction of high, low, popular or elitist, but replaces this with the less-than-satisfactory notion of ‘complex’ culture, which seems to equate to the traditional high arts, the complexities of popular culture and indeed the time required to grapple with them seeming to not require government intervention. Later in the New Labour period, further signals were given that the language of ‘excellence’ was again favored in cultural policy (McMaster 2008) and this was generally taken to equate to high culture and this trend has generally continued under the current Conservative/Liberal Coalition, as might expected.

A forty year experiment not just to democratize access to traditional art but to value popular culture and understand the relationships between culture as art and culture as way of life (without necessarily collapsing them) seems to be at an impasse, and not just in the UK. The economic crisis, particularly in Europe, has seen huge state spending cuts which are likely to continue for some time, and a beleaguered arts sector has retreated to a comfort zone of excellence, with an eye to the market for wealthy tourists, 'posh' people indeed. Despite routine evocations of internet-inspired emancipation, the popular cultural industries are as far from being democratically owned or controlled as ever, and the aestheticisation of daily life appears to have become permanently enmeshed with an image of wasteful consumption. Creativity might be for the people, but turning that into beneficial public policy seems some way away.

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ⁱ Interview with Chris Smith, October 2012

ⁱⁱ Speech to the Institute of Public Policy Research, London, June 16th 2005

ⁱⁱⁱ The Taking Part survey, which has been running since 2006, is the UK's largest survey of cultural participation see (<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-culture-media-sport/series/taking-part>)