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The mutability of cultural value: a critical analysis

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary cultural value debate has been broadly UK-driven, albeit with European and international dimensions. However, the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent focus on sector working conditions has raised urgent questions about the social role and impact of the arts. Starting from the premise that questions of cultural value are subjective, political, and highly contextualised, this article contextualises the debate on cultural value within cultural policy discourse in Ireland and questions the extent to which the concept of cultural value and its related debates are mutable in different national contexts. The article discusses key themes of cultural value in Ireland such as intrinsic value and how identity categories (particularly Irish national identities manifested through culture) co-exist in the specific context of a post-colonial country. Highlighting the significance of data, evaluation, inequality and national identity to evolving notions of cultural value, the article explores the mutability of cultural value across nations.

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Introduction

To date, the contemporary cultural value debate has been recognised as broadly UK-driven and even characterised as a quintessentially English problem (Walmsley, 2023), albeit with European and international dimensions (e.g. Klamer, 1996, 1997; Meyrick et al., 2019). However, the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent focus on working conditions in the cultural sector (Gilmore et al., 2024) has raised urgent questions about the social role and impact of the arts and culture worldwide and has given the debate a new potency.

Starting from the premise that questions of cultural value are subjective, political, and highly contextualised, the article seeks to contextualise the debate on cultural value within contemporary cultural policy discourse in the Republic of Ireland, and to thereby question the extent to which the concept of cultural value and its related debates are mutable in different national policy contexts. This pilot project is informed by a series of depth interviews undertaken with key stakeholders in the Irish arts and

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cultural policy field, including academics, policymakers and funders. It explores how narratives of cultural policy development, structures of funding, and both professional and institutional understandings determine how concepts such as "cultural value" are interpreted and understood.

The article begins with an outline of the cultural value debates in the UK, acknowledging lessons learned and their evolving foci. It then discusses key themes emerging from the interviews around current perceptions of – and approaches to – cultural value in the Republic of Ireland, addressing concerns such as the question of intrinsic value (DCHG, 2020, p. 6) and how Rooney's (2021) "identity categories" (particularly Irish national identities manifested through culture) co-exist in the specific context of a post-colonial country. After highlighting the significance of data, evaluation, inequality and national identity to evolving notions of cultural value, the article addresses the mutability of cultural value across nations and identifies areas for future research.

Understanding the cultural value debate

Discourse on cultural value, as an important area of academic and practitioner interest (O'Brien & Oakley, 2015), continues to be influenced by philosophical tensions between aesthetics and economics (Taylor, 2015). Historically, research on the "ever-present spectre of cultural value" (Walmsley, 2019, p. 105) has been divided into two camps: on the one hand self-reflexive, intrinsic value (culture's ability to reflect on itself and society as a self-contained end, not a means to another goal); and on the other, utilitarian, instrumental value (Belfiore & Bennett, 2007). This somewhat false dichotomy has profoundly shaped current (primarily academic and often disconnected) debates on cultural value ever since (Belfiore, 2020; Hadley et al., 2020). The focus on the ancillary effects of cultural experiences, rather than the actual experience itself, has often enabled instrumental accounts of cultural value to dominate public discourses of value. Concurrently, discussions of cultural value are never far away from discussions of the impact of the arts *on* those that participate in cultural experiences (Walmsley, 2019).

A more useful dichotomy that has underpinned discussions about cultural value is the traditionally binary distinction between the everyday or anthropological understanding of culture championed by scholars such as Tylor (1871) and Williams (1958), and the narrower artistic interpretation of culture reinforced by Arnold (1869) and subsequent champions of cultural perfection or excellence. Although often serving as a distraction or a false dichotomy, in the context of national identity this distinction does help to differentiate the Irish and English perspectives, as we shall see in the course of this article.

In the UK context, Gray (2007) argues that instrumentalisation and commodification of culture began in the 1970s but were made more explicit by the New Labour Government (1997–2010), which linked culture directly to the production of a range of social outcomes and goods (Belfiore, 2012; Hesmondhalgh et al., 2015; O'Brien & Oakley, 2015) and reified the value of culture as determined by the neoliberal logic of the free market (Harvie, 2013). For many scholars, this process of politicisation or "hyperinstrumentalisation" (Hadley & Gray, 2017) – wherein culture is valued solely for its utility in achieving non-cultural objectives, rather than for its intrinsic worth – has led culture to become a tool of government policy (Holden, 2004), thus undermining culture as an independent

policy concern in its own right. As Gilmore et al. (2017, p. 292) argue, if cultural value is articulated only in the language of policy, then "it works to reinforce art forms which are already prioritised by funding as an ostensibly value-driven, rather than data-driven, tool for decision-making" (see also Carey, 2005; O'Brien, 2014).

The political hyperbole surrounding the cultural value of the UK arts sector is compounded by an "epistemological vacuum" in credible research on the lived personal experience of arts and culture, compounded by a lack of robust evaluation of their benefits and impacts (Gilmore, 2014; O'Brien, 2014; Walmsley, 2019) and a system of methodologies and epistemologies of cultural value that legitimises certain ways of working, values and organisational cultures at the expense of others (Newsinger & Green, 2016). This is a direct influence, some argue, of the British tradition of social anthropology in the 1950s–1970s, effectively "draining […] the subject content out of accounts of cultural value" (Kaszynska, 2015, p. 262). Thus, public debates surrounding cultural policy still fail to reflect the inherent complexities and difficulties presented by questions of cultural value (Belfiore, 2020), nor do they address the place specificity suggested by Bennett's (2018) culture complex, which identifies specific sites of cultural activity and engagement as highly distinct in nature and illustrates how culture operates as a "historically distinctive set of assemblages".

From a methodological perspective, the apparent "weaknesses" of qualitative methods – namely a lack of replicability, verifiability and refutability (Carnwath & Brown, 2014) – have led to a "seemingly intractable hierarchy of knowledge" (Walmsley, 2019, p. 93) that favours the quantification of value over more qualitative, creative and nuanced approaches. Certainly, this remains the position of HM Treasury and therefore of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), as stipulated in the Green and Magenta Books: guidance books detailing advice, best practice and processes for all central government departments on appraisal and evaluation. This reductive overreliance on metrics evident in the "preferred" UK Government methods of cost-benefit analysis, contingent valuation and subjective wellbeing has not gone unnoticed or unchallenged by scholars (e.g. Belfiore & Bennett, 2007; Hewison, 2012; Matarasso, 1996; Walmsley, 2012, 2019; Walmsley and Meyrick 2022). More recently, Kaszynska (2024) has argued that cultural value – despite existing as a construct of cultural economics – cannot be measured in economic terms.

The institutional context is key to understanding how value is conceptualised not as a neutral or objective output, nor as an outcome of cultural experience, but as a product of administration and political interactions; what Meyrick et al. (2019) describe as a "conferral of value" between governments, funding agencies, cultural organisations and individual artists. There is a great deal of pressure on publicly funded arts and cultural organisations (and, indeed on their theoretically arm's length funders) to provide data on their activities in order to evidence "measurable" outcomes and thus justify the investment of state funding (Belfiore, 2004; Gilmore et al., 2017; Gray, 2007).

Recent critiques on the relational nature of value allocation and validation in cultural policy (e.g. Belfiore, 2020; O'Brien & Oakley, 2015) and analysis of cultural policy "as text, as discourse, as process and as practice" (Bell & Oakley, 2015, p. 13) enable a more critical interrogation of how our current policies seek to allocate value. Over the last ten years there has been more critical reflection and calls for a more robust approach to the claims we make about cultural value in scholarship and policy, including key

projects such as the AHRC's Cultural Value Project (Crossick & Kaszynska, 2016), the Warwick Commission on the Future of Cultural Value (see Neelands et al., 2015), and several substantive literature reviews (e.g. Carnwath & Brown, 2014; O'Brien & Oakley, 2015). Researchers rejecting proxies for cultural value focus instead on how cultural value *emerges* by centring on the experience and engagement of individuals (Carnwath & Brown, 2014; Holden, 2004). Similarly, while researchers and policymakers have predominantly studied cultural value in *either* the context of its production *or* its consumption, there is growing interest in how these two strands intertwine (O'Brien, 2014; O'Brien & Oakley, 2015). Increasingly prevalent in cultural policy are references to the arts sector as an "ecology" (Holden, 2015; Knell, 2007), which, as Sharpe argues, enables a framing of individual experience as arising "in the extended interaction of the members of a community amongst themselves and within their wider context" (2010, p. 31).

The range of empirical techniques represented in the Cultural Value Project began to answer the call for "a range of evaluative approaches and methodologies appropriate to the different ways in which cultural value is manifested" (AHRC, 2013, p. 3). Accordingly, as the tangible legacy of the Cultural Value Project, the Centre for Cultural Value is primarily concerned with what Kaszynska describes as "first-order" constructs of cultural value, concerned with "what actually happens in experiences of art and culture" (2015, p. 261). Work conducted by the Centre for Cultural Value has highlighted the heterogeneity of the cultural, educational and health policies in play in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. For example, Welsh delegates were primarily concerned with how culture can alleviate the impacts of poverty and represent local and national heritage, whereas English delegates remained fixated on "making the case" for arts and culture to policymakers. This divergence reinforces the need for a nuanced and contextualised approach to both theoretical notions and applied manifestations of cultural value across and within national contexts.

Methodology

If the distinctive value of arts and culture can be gauged by a retrieval and understanding of personal/individual experience via the methods of arts and humanities (Crossick & Kaszynska, 2016) then such a methodology should theoretically be transferable across national boundaries. However, although it is clear that at least the underlying (or first-order) questions of cultural value are universal, and therefore could benefit from a global response, other aspects of cultural value (perhaps what we might call second-order questions) appear to be mutable across national contexts (e.g. the focus on indigenous art and audiences in Australia; linguistic protectionism in France; the lack of public arts funding in the USA).

The question this article seeks to address is how UK-based research into cultural value can be nuanced for, and (en)countered from, differing national contexts; in this case, the Irish context. This exploratory study comprised a preliminary investigation into cultural value in the Republic of Ireland.[1] The inherent nature of exploratory research prioritises initial insights and understanding over broad generalisability. The researchers undertook a qualitative study to establish the current perceptions of and approaches to cultural value in Ireland and to review the existing structures for

policy research and delivery. Via a process of purposeful sampling to identify individuals with the ability to communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive, and reflective manner (Bernard, 2002), eight anonymised, in-depth interviews of 90–120 min were conducted with senior-level stakeholders, researchers and policy-makers working in the cultural sector in Ireland. To record and reflect the different types of positionality amongst the interview cohort, direct quotations were numerically coded, with a typology included in Appendix 1 outlining differing professional roles (academic, practitioner, etc).

The study utilised a small sample size to allow for deep exploration of participants' experiences related to the conflicting impulses in the wider multi-stakeholder discourse of cultural value, aiming to generating initial research questions and identify key themes for future, potentially larger-scale investigations. The study sought to explore the ways in and through which the "wicked problem" of cultural value (Walmsley, 2023) manifested in the Irish context and the extent to which divergent social, political and economic contexts were seen to affect cultural value in the opinion of the interviewees. While the findings cannot be generalised to the wider population, they provide a valuable foundation for future research with a larger sample size to further investigate the identified themes. We acknowledge the study as non-generalisable but argue that the resulting themes detailed below provide valuable insight into defining the parameters for a wider study into the mutability of cultural value in differing national contexts.

As English-born researchers, we were conscious of the need for reflexivity during the fieldwork, particularly as themes around national identity and post-colonialism came to feature within the data. In a practical sense, the absence of any longitudinal situatedness within the Irish context on the part of the research team ensured that the interviews were not premised on any mutual assumptions about how cultural value in Ireland might be articulated or understood. Equally, whilst we recognise the extent of shared cultural activity on the island of Ireland between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland as part of the UK (see e.g. Hadley & Woodley, 2023; Hadley et al., 2022; McCall, 2011), at the policy/legislative level there are distinct two jurisdictions in operation – with different Ministers, legislation, regulations, funding streams, and indeed, two separate Arts Councils. However, an in-depth exploration of those dynamics is out with the scope of the article.

Our approach was to consider this research as a point of departure, not arrival, aiming to signpost for future research and to develop more questions than answers, by seeking to explore the Irish research context and how it interacts with policy development. As Hewison (2014, p. 313) noted when discussing the UK arts sector: "Cultural policy will play an ever-greater part in the national debate, for it must be understood that culture is the national narrative, the ground of identity and the support of society". Such commentary suggests that cultural value is mutable in different national contexts and therefore dependent upon the dominant ideologies and cultural histories at play in a specific place.

The next section examines the inter-relationship of different tiers of cultural policy in Ireland within the wider influencing contexts of national identity, data and post-colonialism. It also compares and contrasts the interviews from Ireland with recent debates in the UK and internationally.

Cultural value and national identity

> Our greatest difficulty is the lack of the right cultural values […] there is a sullen and unexpressed hostility to cultural activities due to an ingrained suspicion that art and culture are anti-national and snobbish. Art activities in the past were exclusive of the people, and glorified the British. (Arts Council Ireland Secretary, Dr O'Sullivan, quoted in Kennedy, 1998, p. 76)

The above citation from Kennedy's study recounts how ideas of culture and identity are interwoven in the fabric of a specific sense of nation-building that has taken place in Ireland over the past century since the formation of the modern Irish State in 1922 (Kelly, 1989; Pine, 1990). It highlights the inherent tensions between the anthropological and elitist schools of thought explored earlier in the literature review. During this study it became clear that it is difficult to have a conversation about cultural value without discussing the "particular identity categories" (Rooney, 2019) that exist in modern-day Ireland.

The romantic nostalgia attached to this discourse – from the role of Lady Gregory and Yeats in the conceiving of Ireland and defining national identity to the role of artists in the struggle for independence and the colourful notion that the Irish state is "founded by culture-makers" (Academic, 6) due to the uprising being led by the archetypal rebel-poet, Patrick Pearse – suggests that the challenge of defining value has long been embroiled in a sense of both identity and independence (see Cooke, 2011, 2022). This gives rise to the contestable observation that culture is "endemically more important to the citizenry of Ireland" (Academic, 6) than that of England. A key rationale for such an assertion rests on the sense of Ireland as a relatively new country/republic/free state wherein – under colonial rule – promoting notions of "Irishness" was seen as a key element of resistance. As such, "to be Irish was to be cultural. To ensure your Irishness, you had to ensure that you knew your culture" (Academic, 6). The significant attachment of artists to a specific sense of place is perhaps key to understanding the inter-relationship between arts/culture and identity:

> In Ireland an artist comes from somewhere … your artists are important, because they're where you're from … if you're going to buy music, why not buy it from someone local to you … local could mean if you're from Cork you buy from a Cork artist … I saw this morning, Sally Rooney's local bookshop will have the first signed copies and you know, there's bunting out in front of the thing. They're so proud of her and, and that's something we do really well here because we're a small country. (Practitioner/Campaigner, 1)

This specific focus on "the artist" (as opposed to "the arts")signifies a key difference in approaches to cultural value in Ireland and the UK, such that, "as two nations, I think we approach the arts and artists hugely differently" (Practitioner/Campaigner, 1):

> I think New Zealand and Canada and Australia are way closer to the Irish model. The French model is closer to us, the German is very close to the English model … my understanding is that being an artist in the UK is almost a disappointment. (Practitioner/Campaigner, 1)

Recent discussion on the introduction of the Universal Basic Income (UBI) for artists in Ireland exemplifies this approach (O'Brien & Clancy, 2021–2022). As Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and the Media, Catherine Martin stated upon the launch of the scheme:

> Today is an historic day for the arts in Ireland and a significant change to the way Ireland recognises and supports her artists. The Basic Income for the Arts pilot scheme is a once-in-a-generation initiative. It makes a strong statement about the value Ireland places on the arts and artistic practice, both for its intrinsic value and in terms of our personal and collective wellbeing, and also in terms of its importance to our identity and cultural distinctiveness on the global stage. (Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, 2022)

The primacy of "the artist" in the Irish national conversation suggests that arts subsidy may then fall into the "contribution not attribution" arena. In this context, an evidence base is not lacking because none is needed to convince policymakers of the value of the arts. Nevertheless, as English researchers operating within a specific and narrow research frame, we must reflexively question the need to prove value in the first place. The failure to develop systems of measurement to establish a longitudinal empirical base for measuring cultural consumption have been noted. Crucially, however, the failure of the UK and other nations to articulate a clear and unequivocal sense of cultural value and to agree on coherent and rigorous methodologies to capture and demonstrate this mean that Ireland had lost little ground by supposedly being a policy "laggard":

> Nothing has measured culture yet. So you know, all we would have done was just fail at a lower level in Ireland to do it properly. I don't know that it's a problem that we haven't done it. (Academic, 6)

This historical policy focus on the artist (Barton et al., 2023) is not however, necessarily seen as a good thing. The issue with specific institutions and mechanisms such as Aosdána,[2] and more broadly with arm's length bodies such as Arts Council Ireland, is that they have the potential to generate a level of self-interest which facilitates what Bourdieu (1979/1984, p. 53) referred to as an "interminable circuit of inter-legitimation" within the arts sector, which in-turn may limit the range of voices being heard and represented in the sector because "there's nobody come along strong enough to question it" (Civil Servant/Policymaker, 8).

Furthermore, in the Irish context, there are both significant temporal and spatial dimensions attached to this discourse:

> We tend to find it easier and more comfortable to value things in the past than value things in the present. Culture in the past has been recognised, but it's recognised in this kind of glowing, romantic light rather than in any form of critical discourse. (Academic/Artist, 5)

One obvious difference – particularly in contrast to the English context – is the absence of any sustained and informed investigation or critique into the construct of cultural value in Ireland. Throughout the research there was a clear sense that the subsidised cultural sector in general – and Arts Council Ireland in particular – had not had its feet "held to the fire" by academia in the same manner as in other nations. In this context, the concern was less the validity of critique and more the possibility of it: "you're not going to make any friends in Ireland if you start going around asking difficult questions" (Civil Servant/Policymaker, 8).

Indeed, the role of academia – and cultural policy scholarship in particular – was felt to be "relatively peripheral in Ireland" (Academic, 2) with academia referred to as "the wise old uncle in the corner smoking a pipe" (Academic, 6) who could occasionally be useful to the arts sector's advocacy concerns:

> They're just there, they're handy. Every now and then [the sector] can draw on them, you can draw on these academics and they're gonna create credence or gravitas to what it is that you as a sector might want. (Academic, 6)

The lack of an embedded and longitudinal academic infrastructure or ecology in the Irish cultural policy field (see Cooke & McCall, 2015) means that critical approaches to cultural policy are not prevalent. There is a subsequent lack of knowledge mobilisation in the sector that effects interesting disciplinary divergences. The latter, however, is more a transnational (or multinational) issue. At this stage, we can only speculate as to the structural reasons for this, but we would suggest that the absence both of cohorts of academics researching cultural policy – such as can be found at Warwick, King's College London, Glasgow and Leeds in the UK – and a tradition of robust and critical engagement with arts policy have led to a position wherein Cooke (2022, pp. 432–433) articulates what he sees as:

> … an anti-intellectual strain in Irish political culture, which works against the development of consistent theoretical frameworks to guide government policy in this area. If the problem in some countries might be a tendency to over-theorise culture, in Ireland it is barely theorised at all.

Exceptions to this include ad hoc research projects commissioned by specific interest groups, such as the recent Screen Ireland report, which aimed to assess "the collective value of the cultural impact and industry development impacts" of the tax credit incentive in film and television production (Olsberg, 2023, p. 3). Yet this is not just an Irish problem: as reflected in the literature review, the perceived absence of a rigorous discourse of practice in arts management and cultural policy (DeVereaux, 2009) is a contributory factor to the sense – which pervades the research data – of cultural value as "a perennially unanswerable question … ; something that is extremely important but completely underappreciated" (Academic, 6). This situation is complicated further by problems with the use of language/terminology and subsequent interpretative concerns: "I think it's one set of nomenclature to basically quantify value, but another set of nomenclature to understand culture" (Academic, 6).

Part of the reason for this understanding of the value of culture may be due to a lack of consistency in the application of terminology, most specifically around the term "the arts". In line with the view that culture is an ecology (Holden, 2015; Markusen et al., 2011), interviewees suggested that there was little to no value in assessing funding in a stand-alone way: "I think if you're only collecting data on identifiably Arts Council-funded events, then you're misrepresenting … you're selling the sector short" (Practitioner/Campaigner, 1). Other times, this idea enabled interviewees to build a conceptual bridge between the (mis)use of terminology and their own advocacy positions, such that data on non-arts council funded activity was suitable evidence to lobby for increased arts subsidy, as is discussed below.

Research and data informing policy

Despite pioneering initiatives such as the Basic Income for the Arts scheme, in terms of policy development, Ireland was considered by interviewees as a follower rather than a leader, with significant disparities highlighted between data and research infrastructure in the UK and Ireland. Structural issues that were seen to exacerbate this situation

included an overall lack of strategic development and policy research at government level, resulting in a "dearth of policy capacity" (Civil Servant/Policymaker, 8) and a questioning of the Arts Council's role as an administrative funding body rather than a development agency for the sector, as in England. On a par with this observation, an overt focus within Arts Council Ireland on project management (as opposed to strategy) resulted in the feeling that culture at governmental level plays a minor role and that cultural policy "needs to be integrated with other policy initiatives for change to come about" (Academic, 2). The success or otherwise of policy initiatives was seen to rest on individual personalities: good things happened when the Minister for Culture was a "good personality match" (Academic, 6) with head civil servants. For instance, Catherine Martin, former Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media and the lead proponent of the Basic Income for the Arts pilot programme, was considered "a good fit" (Academic, 6).

The lack of rigorous engagement between research and policy development was highlighted as follows in one interview:

> All forms of research on culture – it's not seen as valuable at all … qualitative or quantitative data is just not engaged with in a mature way, I don't think, at all, at any level. It's usually a tick-box exercise that has to be done, rather than thinking that anything is possible and that anything could be included in the research. (Academic/Artist, 5)

This led to the somewhat paradoxical perception that, when considering an empirical understanding of cultural value, there was a simultaneous surfeit *and* absence of cultural sector data. Repeated observations were made of the econometric focus for articulating cultural value such that:

> you're repeatedly asked to define the economic value of the investment in you as an organisation … it's how many people attended, how many artists were employed, how many professionals were employed, it's all numbers. (Practitioner/Campaigner, 1)

At the same time, it was clear that significant data gaps existed, particularly regarding cultural consumption. As a recent Royal Irish Academy (2022, p. 41) report notes, an all-island data system "would enable a robust demographic profiling of arts and cultural engagement, and enable that data to be parsed to show audiences for events that are publicly subsidized". Whilst there was a relatively sophisticated understanding of the potential to both record and utilise such data, there was also a recognition in our interviews that the sector did not share such ambitions:

> Definitely, the audience research, and having longitudinal research and having box office data, and really mapping that and doing it consistently, it is just absent. But again, nobody seems to be really asking for it. (Civil Servant/Policymaker, 8)

From both a cultural advocacy and policy development perspective, this general malaise was considered to result in policy-led data rather than data-led policy. In other words, there were perceptions of a surfeit of the wrong kind of data. This reactionary, rather than proactive, stance to research and data was characterised as "massively" problematic:

> There's no interest in data within the Department. None whatsoever, they just throw it together to support whatever argument is constructed within whatever policy document … if you look at *Culture2025*, there's very little data supporting any of that policy direction, in any of it. There's no numbers there at all. (Academic/Artist, 5)

Advocacy and rhetoric

There is a strategic management argument for better data to support organisational thinking and decision-making. Yet as the evolving discourse of data-led cultural policy in the UK shows (see e.g. Neelands et al., 2015, and reviews of DCMS Taking Part data such as Taylor, 2016) more and better data does not automatically reinforce the current position of the arts sector, nor justify increased public subsidy and funding. However, this long and sustained debate on cultural value and non-participation in the UK has resulted in a significant policy shift in the form of Arts Council England's *Let's Create* strategy in 2019. The lack of equivalent Irish data has enabled that debate to be ignored:

> I think it suits the Department not to face that reality. And I know, in the UK, that argument is more mature, where there's maybe a bit more recognition that other forms of cultural consumption can achieve the same aims as high art or institution-led policies. (Academic/Artist, 5)

The confluence of an absence of data and a more ideological, rather than empirical, approach to cultural value has been exacerbated by the commonplace misuse of terminology and has thereby enabled a range of advocacy positions to be adopted. This was felt to be particularly the case during the COVID-19 lockdown, within which: "People do adopt the cloak of 'we're doing this for the people of Ireland'" (Civil Servant/Policymaker, 8). For example, the National Campaign for the Arts[3] at this time released an advocacy campaign under the #savethearts banner which stated, "Without the arts there would be nothing. NO MUSIC. NO BOOKS. NO TV. NO FILM. NO THEATRE. NO DANCE. NO POETRY. NO PAINTING. NO SPECTACLE. NO JOY. NO EXCITEMENT. NO BEAUTY. NO POINT." To suggest that there would be no art, let alone no joy, without state funding is an argument so flawed as to be beyond serious consideration. Belfiore's work (2021) has drawn attention to the rhetorical aspects of cultural policy making amidst the disproportionate claims made on behalf of the arts. But behind this rhetoric lies a more serious issue. The previously noted lack of consistency and interpretative difficulty in the application of cultural sector terminology, most specifically around the term "the arts", has further enabled and ennobled a broad range of discursive opportunity. Indeed, the apparent success of such campaigns (the Arts Council's budget increased from €80 m to €130 m for 2021) is testament to the manner in which ideas of cultural value can be marshalled in a purely ideological discourse which gives little regard to rigour when defining conceptual boundaries.

Social stratification, class and inequality

It is not possible to do justice to such a broad category as social stratification, class and inequality within the context of this article, but certain observations are worth making in the context of this study. As recent work on the cultural sector (e.g. Hadley, Heidelberg, et al., 2022) and more broadly (e.g. Ahmed, 2012) has shown, having a policy on inequality doesn't necessarily create equality. This (lack of) development narrative within the cultural sector has resulted in a quandary for funders, who are seemingly unable to either request – or indeed force – the cultural sector to move beyond a performative stance. Yet it is abundantly clear from other jurisdictions that data plays a key role in highlighting,

evidencing and monitoring progress against forms of inequality (O'Brien & Oakley, 2015). In this area, initial findings suggest that the Irish sector may reap significant benefits from shared learning in addressing persistent issues of inequality:

> How Irish society is dealing with diversity is interesting. And, you know, we're at least a generation behind you in that regard … diversity and inclusion … I suppose 20 years ago, Ireland wasn't multicultural at all … we have so much to learn from the UK, obviously, in how we engage with these new issues for us. (Funder, 4)

Our research suggests that the Irish cultural sector is only recently beginning to address these concerns (see e.g. the Arts Council's 2019 *Equality, Human Rights and Diversity (EHRD) Policy and Strategy*). Interviewees suggested that this may in part be due to the perception of a less marked class system, which in turn affects perceptions of cultural value:

> The discussions about class in Ireland don't happen very often. There's an assumption that everyone has come from a working-class background, and therefore there's no distinction, and everyone's equal. Whereas the reality is, materially, there's huge inequality within the society. It's different to the UK, it's definitely different to the UK. But inequality is a major issue. (Academic/Artist, 5)

Such ideas do not go unchallenged. As Horgan (2021, n.p) wrote in a recent *Irish Post* article: "One of the most startling characteristics of Irish society is the belief, held both by those living in Ireland and those outside, that Ireland has no class system". Horgan attributes this tendency to two factors: a desire to differentiate the Irish state from the British; and an historical economic poverty, which has obscured the growing disparities within modern Irish society. There is an interesting interplay between ideas of class structure and the proximity of culture (broadly conceived) to people's lives, which gives the impression that "high culture" in Ireland "isn't as high" (Academic, 6). One interviewee regarded high art in the UK as "a thorn in the side of the cultural sector", comparing this to Ireland where "[w]e're never as far removed from culture as large segments of the population in the UK are" (Academic, 6). This is surprising given that the cultural turn associated with the founding of the state was largely seen as the work of the Anglo-Irish class (Cooke, 2022). Moreover, studies certainly exist that throw light on inequalities within the middle-class/third-level educated/networked nature of much arts production in Ireland (Barton & Murphy, 2019). In a recent Irish study, McCall Magan (2022) suggests that such opinions might be understood via the transposability of Bourdieu's (1979/1984, 1986) conceptualisation of cultural capital, arguing that the principles of distinction, and of positioning through discernment and cultural discrimination, remain socially and structurally significant in the Irish capital's cultural field. This was reinforced by interviewees:

> The makers of art, in Ireland, are privileged and comfortable, relatively comfortable, like they might have self-impoverishment through working in the arts, [laughs] but their family backgrounds, in terms of they grew up in relative comfort, relative to other people. And that means that the voice of certain people of society isn't represented in the works that are created. (Academic/Artist, 5)

Democratising culture

The "policy turn" in many European states toward a focus on cultural democracy/everyday creativity and a concomitant shift in hierarchies of cultural value (see e.g. Arts Council

England, 2019; Porto Santo Charter, 2021) acknowledges the inherently diverse perspectives and modes of engagement related to expressions of cultural value. Despite the "rich tradition" of cultural democracy in Irish arts policymaking as a "desirable project for rationally based State policy in the arts" (Benson, 1992, p. 30), the paradigm of the democratisation of culture remains paramount in the Irish cultural field, manifesting across regimes of funding, artform hierarchy and audience development:

> They're of the belief that if we just keep on trying to expand the audiences for professional, high-art activities, that eventually everyone will understand and be educated to the benefits of the cultural values within that … those ideas are still evident in current cultural policy. (Academic/Artist, 5)

This trope – redolent with debate which has dominated the UK sector since at least the 1990s (see Hadley, 2021; Walmsley, 2019) – remains configured in a top-down policy mechanism that sees its role as convincing cultural non-attenders of the value of "the arts". The interviewee went on to explain that broader narratives of cultural value and engagement were needed within the sector and policy alike:

> It may have yielded better support from people if we acknowledged the art forms and cultural values that were important to them, rather than say that they should like this other cultural value that's important to someone else. Art is just one form of culture and cultural value – it's not the only one. Whereas they're [Arts Council] allowed to just operate in their own silo, to develop that kind of over-inflated kind of view of the value of art. (Academic/Artist, 5)

in an article addressing the issue of access to the arts in terms of unequal attendance by educational grouping, Irish academic John O'Hagan (1996, pp. 279–280) long ago argued that if the claimed collective benefits associated with the high arts were less significant than those associated with traditional and popular arts, then an option would be to engineer a transfer in public funding from passive to active participation. It is tempting to see the 2017 formation of Creative Ireland[4] – an all-of-government culture and wellbeing programme that inspires and transforms people, places and communities through creativity and that was recently rewarded by a renewal of funding until 2027 – as a much-delayed response to this impetus. Moreover, Creative Ireland (2024) spearheaded the development of the Roadmap for the Digital Creative Industries, which frames new policy development opportunities.

Conclusion

This exploratory study investigates the manifold ways in which questions of cultural value are simultaneously contextual and universal. This apparent contradiction arises from the fact that while the overarching philosophical questions remain relatively stable, the underlying conditions, structures and cultures within which cultural value unfolds are necessarily contextual and vary significantly from one state, or even region, to another. Despite the apparent universality of the phenomenological questions pertaining to cultural value, our research suggests that the construct and its manifestations are highly mutable across different geographical contexts, and therefore researched and justified in profoundly different ways. In other words, the epistemology of cultural value can very fundamentally from one culture or polity to another. As an illustration, the question: "What difference do arts, culture and heritage make to people's lives?" is a valid and

necessary one all over the world. But different socio-political landscapes will inevitably frame, load and investigate this same question in different ways, because all will depend on the rationale, on who is asking the question and why they want to know.

It is equally important not to fall into the mindset of equating cultural value with the value of the cultural sector, nor with the economic value of the wider creative industries. If we recognise cultural value as a shifting, problematic concept with no clear or definitive consensus on its meaning (O'Brien & Lockley, 2015; O'Brien & Oakley, 2015) and its subsequent irresolvability as a "wicked problem" (Rittel & Webber, 1973), we are then free to access more "fruitful and interesting" conversations around cultural value – in particular how it can be researched and "reliably expressed" (Walmsley, 2019, p. 91).

In an English policy context, there are clear signs that the "grand narrative" of universalism as an arbiter of cultural value and the democratisation of culture as a policy model are coming to an end. Whilst approaches to cultural value remain contested, there is nonetheless a discernible policy shift towards cultural democracy in Arts Council England's *Let's Create* strategy. Yet the perceived "othering" of culture in England amongst the interviewees in this study lies in stark contrast to the role of culture in Irish national identity, which has tended to take a more anthropological approach. Indeed, the specific history of Ireland will always make the reduction of culture to industrial strategy far less likely.

Although our interviewees suggested that the lack of empirical (and large-scale quantitative) data in the Irish sector may not pose a significant problem, it remains a significant barrier to addressing questions of inequality related to both cultural production and consumption, the cultural workforce and audiences. The question of how governments can address a systemic lack of representation and diversity in the arts in the absence of data and the presence of conceptually inaccurate rhetoric remains unanswered. This represents a policy and management failure rather that a data failure *per se*.

Although the mutability of cultural value is manifest in our study, it is surely not a paradox to argue that increased transnational discourse is paramount to address the underlying or "first-order" questions of cultural value. This study suggests that it is incumbent upon scholars and practitioners within and across national contexts to convene to explore these questions empirically, ethically and in a robust and sustained manner that can only help each country or region further its own understanding of the value of its cultures, as well as its own unique "conferral of value" within its specific cultural sector and policy context.

Notes

1. This research was conducted in accordance with ethical standards of the AHC Faculty Research Ethics Committee, University of Leeds, UK (# LTSPCI-060), with full informed consent obtained from all research participants.
2. Founded in 1981, Aosdána 'honours artists whose work has made an outstanding contribution to the creative arts in Ireland, and assists members in devoting their energies fully to their art practice' (Aosdána, n.d.).
3. See https://ncfa.ie/.
4. https://www.creativeireland.gov.ie/en/.

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Appendix 1. Interviewee typology and coding

Role	Numerical ID
Practitioner/Campaigner	1
Academic	2
Academic/Governor	3
Funder	4
Academic/Artist	5
Academic	6
Academic	7
Civil Servant/Policymaker	8