

What is the Value of Culture?

In a time of global recession, international public spheres, virtual realities and online societies, defining “culture”, already famous for being “one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language” (Williams, 1983:87), and especially determining its “value” seems to still be creating many difficulties. This not only concerns scholars and practitioners but especially policy makers, who, above all, must govern the public funds which are directed towards this unknown “concept”. Although the tendencies of the moment are either to avoid the term by any means (Lewis, 1990) or simply assume that its definition is common sense for those involved in the conversation, “it is difficult to deal seriously with the subject of art (or culture) without saying what you mean by it” (Lewis, 1990:3). As “culture” is one of those “concepts (...) that we simply cannot do without, because it is used everywhere” (Willis, 2008:xxi), in my attempt of referring to the controversies around its “value” I will start by analysing previous research and discussions around the term itself in order to reach a definition that could be applicable in the field of public policy and funding.

Raymond Williams is probably one of the most cited scholars when questioning the definition of “culture”, not only for including it in his book *Keywords* but for dedicating a part of his career to its study. He follows the history and spreading of the term (from the Latin “colere”, to the English “culture”, the French “civilisation” and German “kultur”) which initially “began as a noun of process” (Willis, 2008:xxi) referring to farming and the growing of crops. “The tending of natural growth was extended to the process of human development” (Williams, 1983:87), an “ideal” definition incorporating both intellect and spirit. During the 19th century the “social” approach attributed more to anthropology emerged, which regarded “culture” as “a whole and distinctive way of life” (Williams,

1961:57). In addition to these, Williams also mentions a functional definition of the term which he suggests could be used by “a Ministry of Culture” and which has a “documentary” side as it refers to activities that “record human thought and experience” (Williams, 1961:57) in the form of material production, such as “music, literature, painting, sculpture, theatre and film” (Williams, 1983: 87) or simply put: the arts.

Regardless of the paths above, throughout its development, “culture” has generally been opposed to something else: civilisation, materialism, biology, receiving an “ideological dimension of social life as against the mundane organisation of government, factory or family” (Kuper, 2000:15). Also, the main discussions around it have been based on binarisms, on the oppositions between high or low, elite or commonplace, mass or popular. However, one common idea keeps repeating itself in all the various sciences which focus on “culture” as one of their objects of study (from archeology to anthropology, history, cultural studies and many more) which is the creation and spreading of a “shared social meaning” (Willis, 2008:7) that refers to the various ways in which we make sense of the world. It is therefore “a collective symbolic discourse, a world of symbols” (Kuper, 2000:16) constructed and deciphered to a certain extent by people belonging to the same community. The Cultural Studies approach is the one that perfectly defines it from this point view: “the actual grounded terrain of practices, representations, languages and customs of any specific society.” (Hall, 1996:439)

In my opinion, when it comes to matters of policy and especially investing public money, culture should be defined as strictly as possible, starting from the anthropological and cultural studies approach, but heading to Beardsley’s functionalism (in Davies, 1991:53) as “activities which predominantly create and sustain social meaning”. Therefore, within it, art is defined as a cultural practice that involves the creation of “a specific and definable

object” (a play, a video or a piece of music for example) and the function of that object is “as a self-conscious, personal or collective expression of something.” (Lewis, 1990:5)

Despite the apparent materialism of the chosen definition, determining the “value” of such a concept is still very problematic, especially when the term “value” itself is subject to a similar confusion. Questions like “what is value?” or “who determines it?” have a very diverse range of answers and when it comes to culture or art, the boundaries are even more blurred as sometimes economic or aesthetic approaches lead to different conclusions and refer to different advocates. This is sustained by the “longstanding scepticism towards measurement within the cultural sector” (O’Brien, 2010:14) because the term “value” can often be unclear and confusing in both use and interpretation. On the other hand, if the criteria according to which one part of culture is more “valuable” than another would be defined, it is yet to be determined who exactly is entitled to measure it.

The problem of “culture value” from a policy making and public funding perspective is not at all new, as even in 1987 (almost 25 years ago), Sir Roy Shaw, former secretary-general to the Arts Council pointed out that “public money is spent according to the aesthetic judgements of small groups of people (...) art is art because somebody says it is” (Lewis, 1990:5). This “somebody” generally has what Bordieu (1985) calls “cultural competence” which he associates with proper previous training that generally includes a specific upbringing in a privileged class and adequate education. Therefore, the value of a work of art mainly comes from its aesthetic quality determined through the combination of different categories such as the social norms of the period it is produced in, the artist’s intentions, the viewer’s training to understand it and the situation in which it is exhibited (Bordieu, 1985).

According to John Tusa, former managing director of the Barbican, this “aesthetic quality should be the essential category for decision-making” (O’Brien, 2010:14). As generally “those coming from privilege “cultural competent” backgrounds are in power” (O’Brien, 2010:19), the artistic value should be determined and maintained by these structures, therefore the main policy makers. However, this approach was not welcomed back in 1987 (Lewis, 1990) and it is definitely not efficient today as both the DCMS (O’Brien, 2010) and the ACE (Gray, 2008) reached the conclusion that apart from those who govern society, the public, the artists themselves as well as all the arts organisations and institutions should be involved in the process of decision making when it comes to funding culture. In this way, a variety of projects, open to all social, political and educational backgrounds could survive the financial difficulties.

On the other hand, in a capitalist society, “the usual way of valuing culture has been through an understanding of its social and economic impact” (O’Brien, 2010:19). If in measuring the financial outcomes of public funded culture things appear to be straightforward, relying on numbers, figures and charts, the social side of “the value” of culture raises a great number of issues. In 2006-2007 The Arts Council England put together a key research program that was meant “to explore how people value the arts” (ACE, 2007) and which focused on public opinion but also on a variety of stakeholders connected to the cultural world. The final reports showed that despite the difficulty of defining and measuring “culture”, there are some “tangible criteria” that can help in the judgement of a work of art: “an original, creative idea; effort and skill of the artist; how the audience understands and responds to the piece (...) creative self-

expression, but also shared experiences.” (Bunting, 2007:12) However, none of the above are easy to account for.

In 2006, DEMOS, an independent think tank in British politics, published a pamphlet which addressed the differences between what policy makers focus on when it comes to the “outcomes of state-funded culture” and the concerns of “the public and most professionals” (DEMOS, 2006). By analysing previous literature and research, Holden pleads that public-funded culture (in which he includes arts, museums, libraries and heritage) “generates three types of value: intrinsic, instrumental and institutional value” (Holden, 2006:11) which are created and consumed within “a triangular relationship between cultural professionals, politicians, policy-makers and the public” (Holden, 2006:10).

The instrumental value is generally the one that stands as justification for the investment in arts and it refers to culture’s ability to achieve an economic or social purpose such as a specific profit or a number of community related objectives. Holden (2006, 2007:15) claims that these sorts of outcomes are really hard to analyse “because of temporal remoteness, complexity of the interaction, the context in which it takes place, and a multiplicity of other factors.” Despite being vague and sometimes irrelevant to the cultural project in question, they still are the most tangible when it comes to the accounting for public spending so all official statements focus on them. He takes as an example “the agreement between Arts Council England and the Local Government Association, which states that their joint approach to the arts will focus on: the creative economy, healthy communities, vital neighbourhoods, engaging young people” (Holden, 2007:16).

The institutional value of culture covers the ways in which it is used by the institutions responsible for its production, display and consumption. It emphasises “the role of cultural organisations not simply as mediators between politicians and the public, but as active agents in the creation or destruction of what the public values (Holden, 2007:17).”

Last, but definitely not least as Holden regards it as the most problematic of the three, is the intrinsic value which he defines as “the capacity and potential of culture to affect us on an emotional level” (Holden, 2007:12). In *Creating Cultural Value* (2006) he dedicates an entire chapter to the difficulty of measuring the intrinsic values and the importance they should be granted when it comes to funding, but reaches no exact method as they refer strictly to “the subjective experience of culture intellectually, emotionally and spiritually” (Holden, 2007:14). If culture would only be regarded through its intrinsic values, “by definition it could not be measured, as it is intrinsic to the object” (O’Brien, 2010:24).

The RAND Corporation Research also focused on determining the strong impact of intrinsic values from a US perspective, reaching three types of benefits: the immediate ones (pleasure and captivation when engaged in the experience), the growth in individual capacities in the long term (“such as enhanced empathy for other people and cultures, powers of observation, and understanding of the world”), the social connection through the experience and sharing of observations, “the expression of common values and community identity through artworks commemorating events” (RAND, 2005:2). Their approach and results seem to be closer to David Thorsby’s (2001) deconstruction of cultural value into: “aesthetic, spiritual, social, historic, symbolic and authenticity value” (O’Brien, 2010:21). On the other hand, he associates the economic value of culture with the willingness to pay for certain products but links the two in an “instrumental

autonomism” approach (Haskins, 1989:1) just as Holden argues that the “intrinsic value is the basis for any instrumental value” (O’Brien, 2010:21).

Following all the discussions on “cultural value” mentioned above, it seems clear that various institutions regard it differently. “Politicians and policy-makers are primarily concerned with instrumental outcomes, professionals are primarily concerned with intrinsic and sometimes institutional value, the public is primarily concerned with intrinsic and with institutional value” (Holden, 2007:20). Therefore, although all efforts are being directed towards the incorporation of all three, when it comes to the management of public funds, the instrumental and possibly institutional levels are essential. One conclusion is definitely certain: “art is just as valuable as language. It is another kind of speaking, bringing our inner thoughts and feelings into the public sphere, it is another expression of our humanity” (Kilroy, 2006:7).

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