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Dr Eleonora Belfiore
Associate Professor in Cultural Policy Studies
Centre for Cultural Policy Studies
University of Warwick
e.belfiore@warwick.ac.uk

‘Defensive instrumentalism’ and the legacy of New Labour’s cultural policies

The paper identifies ‘defensive instrumentalism’ as a main feature that has characterised New Labour’s cultural policies, and which constitutes an important aspect of its legacy. Resorting to instrumental arguments to defend the arts and to make a case for their usefulness is hardly an invention of New Labour, however.. However, in the past, such defensive arguments were built into a more constructive and creative attempt to elaborate a coherent theory of art and an intellectually sophisticated view of the effects of the arts on individual and societies. What the paper argues, then, is that instrumentalism under New Labour has retained its longstanding defensive character, but deprived of the attendant effort to elaborate a positive notion of cultural value.

Keywords: British cultural policy; New Labour; instrumentalism; social impact

Bio: Dr Eleonora Belfiore is Associate Professor in Cultural Policy at the Centre for Cultural Policy Studies at the University of Warwick, UK. Her research interests revolve around the notion of the ‘social impacts’ of the arts, and the effect that the rhetoric of impact has had on British cultural policy in the context of a growing trend towards evidence-based policy making in the cultural sector. Part of this work was published by Palgrave in 2008 as a monograph entitled *The Social Impact of the Arts: An intellectual history*, co-authored with Oliver Bennett.

'Defensive instrumentalism' and the legacy of New Labour's cultural policies

When a party has remained in power for thirteen years, endeavoured to implement an ambitious modernization agenda, increased public spending, and as a result – at least in the case of the cultural sector - effectively developed a new area of policy making (let us not forget that before New Labour came to power, culture secretaries had limited influence within the Cabinet), it is to be expected that a change in regime should feel like the end of an era. In these cases, the assessment of legacies, successes and failures is an inevitable accompaniment to the adjustments to new sets of policy priorities, new visions and strategies. However, the fact that the electoral demise of New Labour, the uncertainty following the electoral result, and the consequent formation of the first ever post-war coalition government (through the unlikely pairing of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats) all took place against the backdrop of one of the most serious global economic recessions in modern times, has contributed to the general sense of an historical chapter closing. This is, therefore, a prime time for taking stock of the past thirteen years, for judging and assessing the extent to which the Third Way has changed the way we understand politics and to assess the legacy of New Labour's political project.

In the spirit of taking stock, the origin of this article lies in my desire to take the opportunity to reflect on some aspects of my own work on some defining features of New Labour cultural policies as much as on the legacies of those policies themselves. The focus of this article is the perceived *instrumentalization* of the rationales for public support of the arts and culture which has widely been identified as one of the most salient features of British cultural policies since the late 1980s. This process had already started in the Thatcherite era, and needs to be seen in the light of what McGuigan (2005) refers to as the hegemonic nature of neo-liberal globalisation that took root then. However, it ostensibly gained momentum and a new emphasis on social, rather than economic, *impact* under New Labour (Belfiore 2002). Following years of enthusiasm for the policies of a government that seemed, for the first time, to take the arts and the cultural sector, the mid-2000s came to be dominated by the question of whether the price for relevance, a higher profile and better levels of funding might in fact have been too high.

New Labour and *instrumentalism*

Several accounts, theorizations and explanations have been offered to make sense of the cultural policy developments of the early New Labour years, but I still find Clive Gray's notion of 'policy attachment' one of the clearest. Gray explains the perceived instrumentalization of the arts and culture as the outcome of a process by which a public sector that had limited public visibility, very limited budgets and even less political clout gradually came to 'attach itself' to other, more prominent and better resourced areas of the welfare state, in the hope of sharing into their budgets and partaking of their greater political relevance (Gray 2002). This attachment strategy took the form of a top-down version in which the government tried to impose an instrumental agenda for the arts and culture through the introduction of prescriptive targets and clear expectations that the subsidised arts should contribute to the 'joined-up' delivery of social and economic agendas, and a bottom-up one – whereby the sector itself strived to demonstrate its 'usefulness' in socio-economic terms, seeing in the claim for impact a route to secure better funding levels (Gray 2008).

One of the consequences of the prominence of instrumentalism and impact (social impact in particular) in British cultural policy discourse has been the concentration of attention on the question of impact evaluation. Methodological problems around arts impact assessment surged to centre stage, whilst the question of understanding what the notion of 'social impact of the arts' actually entails remained obscured by the more immediate requirements of the policy making process (Belfiore and Bennett 2007). Yet, I would argue that there is much that the cultural policy maker and the policy researcher can learn from a more thoughtful and philosophical approach to the notions of 'impact', 'instrumentalism', and the underlying assumption that the arts can be used as a tool to effect real transformation on individuals' sense of self, place, belonging, morality, etc., and ultimately on communities and society. This paper therefore represents my attempt to consider what insights into the legacy of New Labour's policies for culture can be gained from an historically based intellectual exploration of the ideas that the arts can be 'useful', and can be used 'instrumentally' for the betterment of the world.

If we look historically at the idea that the arts can have an impact in a range of areas - such as, for instance, psychological well being, health, moral education and behaviour, educational development, political and social empowerment and emancipation, the forging of individual and group identity – we can only come to the conclusion that ‘instrumentalism’ is in fact 2,500 years old. Contemporary British cultural policies, then, might seem merely the latest embodiment of longstanding ideas that have become progressively normalised and, from the late 18th century onwards, institutionalised and embedded within powerful cultural and educational organisations, national curricula and public sensibility. Most Western theories of art¹, indeed, can be defined, following Abrams’ (1953, p. 15) definition, as *pragmatic*, in the sense that they all look “at the work of art as a means to an end, an instrument to get something done, and [tend] to judge value according to its success in achieving that aim”. Therefore, the notion that the arts have a function to fulfil in society (though views of what that function may or ought to be are, of course, varied) and that, alongside purely aesthetic considerations, the perceived success or failure in fulfilling that function is central to the attribution of *cultural value*, has been with us for a very long time.

Furthermore, very much like their contemporary counterparts, these older kinds of instrumental arguments always had a *defensive* character, in the sense that they were relied upon to ‘make the case’ for the arts’ value and legitimacy at times of perceived threats. Elsewhere (Belfiore and Bennett 2007), I have referred to the development, within Western aesthetic thought, of both a ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ tradition. The ‘negative’ tradition, as the label hints to, brings together those who have maintained that the impact of the arts on people and society should not necessarily be taken to be a desirable one. The charges moved against the arts and popular culture change with the times and with the interests of those who make them. However, they are broadly centred around the idea, first expounded by the Classical Greek philosopher Plato, that the arts have a profound hold on the emotional, passionate and fundamentally irrational part of the human soul, and through that hold can affect moral behaviour negatively. This idea has eventually developed into an intellectually lively, rich and remarkably resilient strand of thinking around the arts and their effects.

¹ The focus on Western ideas is dictated purely by the article’s intention of understanding *Western*, and more specifically, *British* developments in cultural policy making.

The neglect that this tradition has encountered – for rather obvious reasons – within cultural policy discourse should not mislead us into thinking that the ‘positive’ tradition, centred around the key notion that ‘the arts are good for us’ in all its multifaceted manifestations, has always been the predominant one. Indeed, one of the more surprising discoveries of my recent research has been, for me, the realisation that the ‘positive’ tradition started and grew largely through the need to put forward compelling responses and rebuttals to the censures and negative perceptions championed by the ‘negative’ one. From the very beginning, with Aristotle’s attempt to salvage the mimetic arts from Plato’s condemnation, the tradition of thinking that holds that the arts are a positive force for change has been mainly *reactive* to the perceived threat posed by the influence and popularity of the negative view.

In the contemporary context, instrumentalism also has a self-justifying aim. The popularity of instrumental policy rationales is ultimately to be understood in light of the fact that, within the presently dominant neo-liberal political and ideological framework, arguments rooted in notions of utility and impact are perceived to be rhetorically powerful; they are powerful because they can be (and indeed, they have proved to be) *persuasive* in a policy context (Belfiore 2010). They ostensibly lend the public cultural sector (and its claims on the public purse) legitimacy whilst sidestepping difficult and thorny questions of cultural value, which have been complicated further by the collapse of the distinctions between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture, and the blurring of equally crucial dividing lines between professional/amateur and subsidised/commercial arts. In so far as they both are instances of a defensive strategy, New Labour’s version of instrumentalism would seem to fit in quite nicely within this older and well established model.

There is, however, a problem with this conclusion. To see New Labour’s version of instrumentalism merely as the contemporary embodiment of an intellectual position that has a long and complex history leaves open an important question: this account does nothing to explain the widespread perception, in the cultural policy field, that today’s form of instrumentalism has brought about a dramatic and radical change to the established relationship between government and the business of supporting the arts. This radical shift, which was connected from the outset to a perception of crisis, dates back to the 1980s, a period which Ruth Blandina Quinn (1998, p. 165) has defined as a “turning point for the

arts”, when “the basis of funding to the arts changed significantly and governmental relationship with, and interest in, the arts would change accordingly”. It is certainly not a mere coincidence that this turbulent period should also have been the time of the ascendancy of the popularity of economic impact discourse (Myerscough 1988).

What remains unexplained if we opt to see instrumentalism as a simple historical continuum from old to new forms of instrumentalism, thus, is the widespread perception that there is something distinctive about instrumentalism in its current incarnation, something that has brought about a traumatic and dangerous break with how things used to be, and it is to tackling this problem that the remainder of this article is devoted.

Versions of instrumentalism: ‘positive’ vs. ‘defensive’ instrumentalism

Whilst, as we have noted above, past varieties of instrumentalism also had a defensive character, it is important to underline that they mostly served to counteract negative conceptions about the arts that were perceived to have become influential, and therefore threatening, so that the possibility could be opened up for more constructive, ambitious and bold articulations of the value of the arts, their effects on individuals and their functions in society. For this reason, we will refer to this form of the phenomenon as “positive instrumentalism”. So, by way of example, Aristotle – who was concerned by the influence of the Platonic censure of the poets (whom he had famously suggested should be banned from the ideal state) - developed a very powerful and clever (yet also rather pragmatic) apology of the positive and moral effects of poetry and the theatre by recourse to the notion of catharsis. This defensive stance ultimately aimed to redeem from condemnation the pleasure that derives from engagement with the mimetic arts, but it also represents the kernel that will eventually evolve into the intellectual core of the positive tradition (Belfiore and Bennett 2008). Similarly, The Italian humanists of the Renaissance were concerned about the widespread religious hostility against classical, and therefore pagan, thought and literature that dominated in 15th and 16th century Italy. In order to legitimise their desire to study the works of the pre-Christian poets and justify it as a morally worthy endeavour, they developed the idea – by today’s standards, positively bizarre – that classical poetry could be

interpreted as allegories of religious truth, and could therefore be fruitfully employed for moral and religious instruction. This was but a pragmatic way out of an impasse and, as such, it was not without its problems – the Humanists were chastised by later commentators for having made poetry into “merely a popularized form of theology”, by suggesting that the value of poetry lies in its effectiveness as a tool of moral education (Spingarn 1908, p. 8).

However, there is much more to the Italian Humanists’ understanding of the cultural value of poetry than the suggestion that it should act as the handmaiden of theology, for they indeed went on to develop this instrumental justification into one of the most ambitious philosophies of education and personal *bildung* centred on the ennobling powers of literature ever developed in the West. Their views have proved extremely influential in putting the idea of the arts as a means of moral refinement right at the heart of Western aesthetic and educational thought. In these examples, thus, instrumentalism is ‘positive’ in that it has an *enabling* function: it helps creating the space to turn censure of the corrupting powers of the arts into a bold articulation of their cultural as well as moral value.

Instrumentalism under New Labour has retained its longstanding defensive character, but deprived of the attendant effort to elaborate a positive, confident and coherent notion of cultural value. We will therefore call this “defensive instrumentalism”, since what used to be a strategy meant to enable a confident case for the arts has now become the case itself: in this version, instrumentalism has retained its protective dimension, but the defensive moment leads to nothing beyond itself. The limitations of ‘defensive’ instrumentalism became evident during the ‘cultural value debate’, which started to develop in the early to mid 2000s, and which was, interestingly, started by very senior New Labour politicians themselves. Most notably, Tessa Jowell, then Secretary of State for culture, raised the issue explicitly in 2004, in a much cited personal essay in which she admitted that politicians have tended to discuss culture in instrumental terms.

Jowell candidly acknowledged that the spiky issue of the explicit articulation of the values upon which policies are based needed to be finally faced, and posed a question that would dominate cultural policy debates pretty much consistently until the government was no longer: “How, in going beyond targets, can we best capture the value of culture?” (*Ibid.*,

p.18). The question developed into a wide-ranging debate, which spilled over from the cultural sector into academia, think tanks, and the mainstream press (Holden 2004). Yet, the debate remained ultimately stuck in an unhelpful and artificial dichotomy between so-called 'intrinsic' and 'instrumental' impacts of the arts, and in heated arguments over what ought to be classified under either label which have done little, arguably, to move the cultural policy debate forward, in Britain and beyond (Gibson 2008; Belfiore 2006b). The 'cultural value challenge' is therefore still very much open: the last section of this paper indeed argues that the resurgence of a clearly defensive and narrow economic instrumentalism in the post-New Labour, post-recession cultural policy discourse is proof of the extent to which the British cultural sector has been unable to articulate the case for cultural value in an effective and meaningful way.

The prevalence of what I am calling 'defensive instrumentalism', however, should not be interpreted essentially as a symptom of philistinism or as a sign that New Labour did not genuinely care for the arts. Significantly increased spending is ostensibly an indication of the fact that the Labour administration attributed some kind of value to the arts. The nature of what got funded also demonstrates that the spread of instrumentalism did not radically or substantially change the nature of public arts funding and its underlying cultural values and premises for cultural policy. The rhetorical emphasis on impact did change the mode of public discussion of arts funding, but it did not alter the way in which resources were distributed to the sector. A large number of diverse and community oriented organizations benefitted from the availability of a larger pot of money, but the recipients of the largest grants, which account for a very substantial portion of the available funding, pretty much remained the same as they were in Keynes' times.

What emerges from the analysis of British policy discourse, however, is the struggle to articulate those values beyond the pragmatically instrumental. Tessa Jowell's already mentioned personal essay acknowledged this, yet was not able to resolve the situation and avoid contradiction (Belfiore 2006a). The government's resulting over-reliance on defensive instrumentalism for rhetorical purposes, the difficulty in being open about the real values behind policies, and clear in their articulation pose significant problems of accountability and transparency. These problems need to be considered in the broader context of the two other salient features of New Labour cultural policies: the cult of the measurable (embodied

in the systematic imposition of targets and performance indicators in public service delivery and the promotion of an 'audit culture') and the myth of ideology-free policy making through the commitment to evidence-based policy exemplified by the slogan "what works is what counts" (Belfiore and Bennett 2010). As I have argued elsewhere (Belfiore 2004), this is, of course, a highly ideological position itself, and no amounts of evidence will ever be able to neutralize the inherently political nature of the policy process.

Arguably, the rejection of an ideological view of policy and decision making, and the attendant fixation with targets, performance measurement, and 'evidence', are a means to gain legitimation in a contested area of policy making, and offer an appealing displacement activity: they are meant to act as a substitute for precisely the more positive, constructive articulation of values and beliefs at the roots of cultural policies that a reliance on defensive instrumentalism aims to bypass. The end result of this process of avoidance, which is obfuscated by the official pursuit of policy transparency and accountability, is that political and ideological questions are reformulated as technical issues to do with the practicalities of evidence collection and policy evaluation (Fischer 2003) So, in the case of cultural policy, with regards to the question of instrumentalism, the exquisitely ideological question of making the (political) case for the arts has been translated in the rather more technical (and therefore apparently neutral) issue of arts impact assessment, with the focus firmly on the methodological problems of evaluation rather than on thorny questions of cultural value, and the *political* problem of how to address the as of yet unresolved issue of widening access and participation to the publicly supported arts.

Conclusions: The long reach of 'defensive instrumentalism'

The particular brand of instrumentalism that has become the hallmark of New Labour's approach to cultural policy, thus, is rooted in deep political and cultural changes relating to the shift from state to market in the delivery of public services that took place in 1980s Thatcherite Britain, signalling the beginning of the dominance of free market ideology in Britain and beyond. As Nicholas Garnham (2005) has argued, New Labour not only accepted this shift, but in fact worked to accelerate it, as demonstrated by the changes in the

language of policy, in which public spending begun to be referred to as an ‘investment’ to be assessed against a predefined set of indicators.

The legacy of New Labour, then, can in partly be seen as the entrenchment of this shift from state to market into the fabric of public policy making, which also explains the persistence, in the post-New Labour era, of the allure of ‘defensive instrumentalism’. This could indeed be seen in action in the intense period of activism that the cultural sector and politicians engaged in during the 2010 electoral campaign, and even more so in the weeks and months immediately following the formation of the coalition government, when it became clear that cuts in public funding would be deep and pervasive. Whilst reasons of space will not allow for a detailed analysis of the post-election and pre-Comprehensive Spending Review campaign set up by the arts and cultural sector to fight the prospect of severe cuts in funding, it is immediately evident that what characterised it was a clear flavour of 1980s nostalgia in the shape of the revival of old – yet still reliable in times of crisis – arguments based on economic instrumentalism.

That economic impact is back in fashion is immediately apparent in the manifesto pointedly entitled *Cultural Capital: A manifesto for the future*, collectively published in March 2010 by the most prominent national cultural and heritage organisations, and launched at a very high profile event at the British Museum. The general point of the manifesto is that cutting funding to the arts and culture in the delicate post-recession phase would be foolish, since the arts and culture have such an important economic impact on the British economy that – as the document’s subtitle declares – “investing in culture will build Britain’s social and economic recovery”. To make the point even clearer, large placards designed by British celebrity artists Tracey Emin, Damien Hirst, and Anish Kapoor with the slogan “You can bank on culture” were prominently on display at the launch. This exercise is clearly a prime example of ‘defensive instrumentalism’: Richard Morrison (2010), of the *Times*, observed that the manifesto “should really be turned into a movie called *Carry On Subsidising*, so blatant is its pitch for culture to be given special protection in the coming purge of public spending”. A similar observation can also be made about the witty video that artist David Shrigley produced for the ‘Save the Arts’ campaign², where references to the power of the

² <http://savethearts-uk.blogspot.com/> (accessed 3rd February 2011).

arts to entertain and humanize are treated humorously in the cartoon sections of the video, whilst the important message, which is all about the economic impact of the cultural sector, is reserved for the written text that intersperses the video and whose function is to drum the really important message home.

As was the case under New Labour, the purely defensive nature of this new guise of economic instrumentalism is clear. Some artists themselves seem to have subscribed to it, and to have given up the chance to 'make the case' in other terms (or even 'their own' terms): Wolfgang Tillmans – established German artist residing in the UK and Turner Prize winner - when interviewed by the Guardian at the 2010 edition of the Frieze art fair was asked: "What's the best argument you can put forward for not cutting the arts?". His reply was: "It makes sense on an economic level. Britain doesn't have much to export but the creative industries are a huge export industry. I don't want to sound too economical but that is the only language this government seems to understand"³.

Considering the professed antipathy of the Conservatives both for arts instrumentalism and 'targetolatry'⁴ (the obsession for targets and performance indicators that has come to be so strongly associated with New Labour, despite its Thatcherite origins), it would have been reasonable to expect that a change in regime might have appeared to open up the possibility of a different approach to 'making the case' for the arts – one less reliant on notions of 'utility' in the shape of impact as a proxy for value. Yet, this has not proved to be the case. Once again, we are in the throes of a 'defensive instrumentalism' that leaves no room for a positive and constructive vision.

Attempts to forge links between the arts and the 'Big Society', the Conservatives' big idea for the future of the country, have so far seemed unable to move beyond the paradigm of instrumentalism inherited from New Labour. For example, the Conservative MP Jesse Norman (2010), in a recent book discussing his understanding of the Big Society makes a plea for the 'social power of music', and his argument could have been lifted from any similar advocacy text produced in the past thirteen years:

³ This was a *Guardian's* online feature: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/gallery/2010/oct/13/frieze-art-fair-cuts> (accessed 3rd February 2010).

⁴ See Vaizey 2009.

[...] we need to move music, musical performance and singing from the political periphery to a central role as a social and economic, as well as cultural priority. The research evidence now clearly shows that music confers huge social, cognitive, emotional and therapeutic benefits, especially on those who take an active part in it. These benefits have been demonstrated for specific groups such as prisoners, neonates and children, or those with mental or physical disabilities or dementia” (p. 209).

Norman then goes on to refer to music’s positive neurological effects, the way it encourages creative thinking and “promotes a sense of mutual respect and aspiration to reach the highest standards” (*Ibid.*). The claims are familiar, and indeed, they remind me of the famous phrase uttered by one of the main characters in Tomasi di Lampedusa’s 1958 novel *The Leopard* as a comment on the turbulent political situation of 19th century Sicily: “Everything must change, so that everything can stay the same”.

What to make, then, of New Labour’s legacy in the field of cultural policy? I would suggest that the problem with ‘defensive instrumentalism’ is not limited to the well explored problem of impact definition and measurement. The big question around ‘defensive instrumentalism’ is not whether it works as a provider of justification for funding, or not (in this respect, its track record at the turn of the new millennium was impressive). As a matter of fact, the problem is not even with instrumentalism itself. As I have argued at the beginning of this article, the tendency to see the arts as having a set of functions within society and to value them in so far as those functions are effectively fulfilled is a way of understanding and appreciating the arts that has a very long and illustrious pedigree in Western civilization. The problem lies in the specific type of narrow instrumentalism that has come to dominate public discourse, which is predicated on the application of a limiting utilitarian and calculating logic to arts policy, whereby precisely quantifiable ‘returns’ need to be guaranteed for the ‘investment’ received.

However, the real issue with this narrow and defensive instrumentalism is that it ultimately is not enough to provide a sound political justification of public arts funding. So, New Labour’s legacy in cultural policy is to have left the cultural sector in a rhetorically weak position, struggling to make that ‘rational argument’ that Alan Davey, chief executive of Arts

Council England, thinks is what is needed: “we have to keep [making the case for the arts] and justifying it [...]. The way the sector can help is to help us make rational arguments and make the arguments themselves” (in Jones 2010, p. 30).

What thirteen years of New Labour policy have left behind is the paradox of a cultural sector that has experienced a remarkable growth in funding, a more prominent political profile and, indeed, a golden age, yet also appears to be consistently on the defensive, vulnerable, and lacking in confidence when it comes to articulate its own value. The history of New Labour’s cultural policies speaks of a political class, a professional sector, artists and commentators who – at least in the official political arena - are more comfortable speaking about ‘value for money’ than money for values. This rhetorically weak position means that the issue of making a ‘rational’ argument for the sector remains still an unresolved one, which is dangerous in a time of recession and funding cuts. However, the problem here goes beyond concerns over adequate financial support for the arts and culture. What this paper charts is effectively the culmination of the process of commodification of public policy, that is, the shift from the use of political values to the use of economic values as a rationale for policy choices that had started in the 1980s (Gray 2000). In this context, the possibility of a constructive notion of cultural value that does not derive legitimacy from exchange value becomes undermined. When market logic is transformed into a “universal common sense” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2001), is there any space in public policy for values beyond economic value? The unresolved challenge of articulating non-economic values in the context of public policy is indeed the real legacy of New Labour, and the other face of the ‘golden age’ its administration represented for the arts and culture in Britain.

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